

## Lucky Seven

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by [BetteNoire \(WeAreWolves\)](#)

### Summary

Captain America trashes his motorcycle a lot. Tony says he'll fix it, then never gets around to it and just buys him a new one. Steve, the Depression-era kid, can't stand the waste and goes looking for somewhere near him in Brooklyn where he can get his bike fixed. That's how he finds Red Star Bike Repair, and the hot Russian-immigrant bike racer who runs it: all long hair and muscles and tattoos. And for the first time since he woke from the ice, Steve feels a connection to someone; a comfort in the other man's silences and his space, an attraction in his sheer skill at racing. But James Barnes isn't exactly who he seems...

[\*Translation into Русский available here!\*](#)

□

# The Start of Something

## Chapter Summary



Art by [Jessica Jones Smiled](#)

*Blind dates and bashed-up bikes.*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“No, leave the bike with me! I'll fix it,” Tony says, as the Avengers stand in the rubble-filled aftermath of a rogue Kree faction's misguided attempt to take over Roosevelt Island. “Happy can drive you home. Of course, if you still lived in the *Tower*--”

Steve sighs and pulls his cowl off, running his hands through sweaty, dirty hair. He'd left his last bike with Tony, when he lived at the Tower, and had never seen it again. It's probably still sitting in the corner of some lab, forgotten, behind the detritus of more exciting projects. Tony had eventually bought Steve a new motorcycle. In fact, he'd bought Steve *six* new motorcycles, one from each of the top performance brands. Steve had shuddered at the expense; the waste. Much as it was nice to run his hand over a Ducati, Captain America had to ride an American brand and... he just missed his old Harley. He'd told Tony as much, and the next day, four more Harleys had appeared in Steve's section of the Tower's parking garage. Including a vintage one from 1945. Painted in red, white and blue with Steve's shield logo.

What Steve now thinks of as The Motorcycle Incident had been one of the final straws in Steve moving out of the Tower and back to Brooklyn. He wants to live in peace and quiet. He wants the ability to do simple day-to-day activities without Tony Stark inserting himself into every single one of them. He likes Tony; heck, he likes *all* the Avengers. But he's tired. Tired of being a symbol. Tired of having no life other than the job. Tired of people assuming (admittedly, mostly out of kindness and friendship) that they could make better choices about his life than he could. Tired even of battle. Another week, another fight. Dust and wreckage and blood on the asphalt and SHIELD agents on mop-up and red light, blue light.

He'd hoped the move to Red Hook would make a difference but so far, a month later, it just underlines how he has no friends other than the Avengers. But he isn't going to tell Tony that. And he certainly isn't going to leave his banged-up Harley with him.

It isn't that far from Roosevelt Island to Red Hook, even in the state his bike is in. As he shrugs his leather jacket on, and his helmet, Natasha strides over. "Hey, handsome. Don't forget your date tonight!"

Steve groans. He had completely forgotten.

Natasha punches his shoulder, affectionately. "No cancelling! She's a fashion designer. Friend of Janet's. Very hot, and very artistic."

He wants to cancel. He just doesn't want to make any sort of effort tonight. And people are always such an effort. But... he can't complain to himself one moment about not having any friends other than the Avengers, and then cancel out on dates with potential new friends who are not Avengers. He texts the girl; her name is Bree.

SGR: Hi, it's Steve. My bike broke down and I can't pick you up. Do you mind meeting me at the restaurant? It's a nice local place in Red Hook called Sketch.

BREE: OK. 8 still good?

SGR: Sure. See you then. I'll probably be wearing a brown leather jacket.

BREE: I know what you look like, Steve.

Steve waggles his phone at Natasha. "There, I just reconfirmed."

Natasha throws him a proud smile as she walks away towards Clint's car, and fake-applauds a little.

Steve sighs and starts up the bike. Its steering is fucked, the back wheel out of alignment, and the engine had taken the brunt of a few blasts from a Kree laser-gun. Top speed is about 20 miles per hour. But he manages to limp past the emergency vehicles around the perimeter (red light, blue light) and across the bridge. He ditches the BQE for more local streets where it'll be safer if the bike konks out completely.

It's just after sunset when he gets home to his apartment he'd rented in the new luxury building ("Steve, you have to choose this building. It at least has security," said Natasha) in the old, waterfront neighborhood. He locks his bike up and limps upstairs to shower. There's a SHIELD agent living next door to keep an eye on him, and the upstairs apartment is kept vacant for safety. From the bathroom window he can see a street full of the places he *wanted* to live, the little

brownstones with their front stoops and back gardens, where he could have had some rose bushes, maybe a little vegetable patch.

He stands under the hot water for half an hour, leaning against the shower wall, before he can even summon the energy to soap himself off.

Maybe the girl will be nice, he thinks, as he throws on an old pair of jeans and a clean t-shirt and his leather jacket. Bree. It's a funny name. He finds a lot of the modern names funny. They even name children after stores, now: his first Tiffany had been quite a shock, and there's a girl who works at the Tower who had been named Gucci.

The restaurant is a place he'd been looking forwards to trying out for a while, a little local place that does gourmet burgers and has crayons and paper at every table. Its walls are plastered with the resulting sketches, and the little place always catches Steve's eye as he passes on his way to Fairway, the local supermarket.

Steve is right on time but there are no single blonde girls in the restaurant. He waits outside for 15 minutes, and wonders if he shouldn't have dressed up more. He then wonders if the girl stood him up. He shoots her a quick text to see where she is but gets no reply. He feels terrible for wishing she has stood him up, so he could go home and get some sleep and not have to make conversation.

Steve realises he's pacing up and down the street in front of the restaurant and possibly looking creepy, so he decides that he'll slowly walk around the block once, and if Bree is not there when he gets back, if there's no text to say where she is, he'll just text her back again and say he's going home.

Red Hook is a patchy neighborhood, with open lots, old brownstones, and a lot of industrial buildings all mixed together. It's also pretty quiet at night and a long way from the subway. The burger place backs onto one of the more industrial sections of the area, and as Steve reaches that part of the block, he notices a pretty brick building that looks like it used to be a firehouse, or a carriage house.

It's one of those moments that he loves about New York City: rounding a block to find a little piece of architecture that's offbeat and surprising and charming. He was immediately drawn to the building, its big double doors and its long, arched windows made up of small rectangular panes of glass. The whatever-it-is is shut up tight for the night. The lights are off on the ground floor but light filters out of a curtained second-floor window. It must be a business, Steve thinks. The doors have a big red star painted on them, half on one door, half on the other. Huh. Red Star. That could be anything. Bakery; art gallery; pricey clothing store.

Steve peers in the window to see if there's a sign, or some more indication what the space is used for. Then he huffs out a laugh, fogging the window and shakes his head as he steps away. It's a motorcycle repair shop. There's a brand-new, cherry-red Indian Scout parked in view of the window, and a turned-off neon sign above that says BIKE REPAIR.

Steve grins to himself as he finishes his circuit of the block and approaches the burger joint again. He's definitely going back there tomorrow, providing the world gives him a day off from having to save it.

Outside the burger joint, a thin blonde in very high-heeled shoes is standing, arms folded, looking a little annoyed. Steve realises that it's Bree, his blind date, and walks up and introduces himself. "Did you have trouble finding the place?" he asks.

The girl sighs. "Ugh, I forgot Red Hook is basically the moon. It's like, half an hour's walk from

the subway,” she says, glancing down pointedly at her precarious, strappy high heels. Steve looks down too. She's so... thin, in skinny jeans that emphasise how long but also how borderline emaciated her legs are.

He thinks briefly about what it would be like to make love to her, and imagines accidentally snapping one of her bones.

Steve has only had this body for a few years. He is still new to it, still occasionally forgets his strength and breaks a glass or pulls a door off its hinges or crushes a drawer handle. And sure, he'd messed around plenty, between USO girls and nurses and the occasional more successful of Nat's endless string of blind dates. (They always wanted a kiss, just to say they'd kissed Captain America, and Steve felt somehow he'd be disappointing them if he didn't. But it rarely went further.) Truth be told, though, he was scared of having intense feelings for someone, of being in a position where he'd really let go during sex. He could badly hurt his partner. But at the same time, he *wanted* to love. He saw the gentle touches and hugs that Natasha and Clint traded and he longed for that sort of physical comfort. But Bree was Blind Date #12 and so far, none of the dozen girls Nat had fixed him up with had been... right.

“...Steve?” Bree says, concerned.

Steve blushes, realising he's spaced out for a few minutes. “I'm really sorry. I just moved here and I'm still getting used to the neighborhood,” he says, offering her his arm to escort her in to the burger place. “But, I did just find a place that might be able to fix my bike, so next time, I promise, you won't have to walk from the F train.”

“This place is... quaint,” Bree says, looking somewhat judgmentally at the basic little restaurant.

They slide into a booth and Bree looks at the menu. “Oh God, they don't have a license,” she groans. She catches Steve's look of confusion and shows him both sides of the menu. “No booze,” she explains.

“Oh, sorry. I, I don't drink. I never even thought--” he starts, then he stands up. “There's a bodega down the street? I could get us a bottle of wine from there?”

“No, it's okay,” Bree says, putting an arm on his. “I'll just have iced tea. I could do without the wine calories anyhow.”

Steve smirks. “I warn you I'm going to order about three burgers. I eat like a horse.” He's nervous. He's never good with new people unless he's being Captain America, and he doesn't want to be Captain America right now. He just wants a burger and a conversation. But what do you say to people who aren't superheroes or spies? Steve's hands reach over of their own accord and grab a piece of the drawing paper and the bowl of crayons. He starts sketching.

“Do you want to draw?” he asks, offering Bree a piece of paper.

“Sure,” she says. “I wanted to be a fashion designer, but I ended up in PR. Be nice to sketch a few dresses again.”

“Yeah, I wanted to be a soldier and I ended up as a chorus girl,” Steve says.

Well, that kills the conversation stone dead. *Great one, Steve*, he thinks to himself. *How do you normal?*

The waitress comes over, a cute hipster girl with horn-rimmed glasses, a Louise Brooks bob, and a chest tattoo of sparrows and scrollwork. She takes their order (three bacon cheeseburgers for Steve,

a salmon and avocado salad for Bree), and looks over their shoulders at their sketches. “Oh, you drawing Red Star?” she asks.

“Huh?” Steve says, then looked down, realising he'd sketched the little Victorian brick building housing the bike repair shop.

“James is great,” says the waitress. “He brought my Vespa back from the *dead*. Like, that bike didn't need repair, it needed a séance.”

Steve smiles. He liked hipster girls. They were sassy.

“So, um, save the world today? I saw something on the news about aliens and Roosevelt Island,” Bree says. “What was that like?”

Steve's smile falters. “It was... there are a bunch of people staying in a gym now who lost their homes and all their possessions. We got them evacuated in time, but they lost everything. And I was right next to this woman who'd been out getting groceries, and her leg got crushed by falling mortar. I, I, I don't remember much about the fight. Just... just... afterwards, when it was finally quiet again except for people crying and looking for each other, and all the emergency vehicles and their lights. Red lights. Blue lights.”

Bree is looking at him with a shocked expression on her face. And not a *I'm shocked about the human tragedy of this* expression, but a *you have no actual grasp on societal norms* expression.

Steve puts his head in his hands and sighed. He has no grasp on societal norms.

“I'm sorry, Bree. I should have cancelled. Tonight's not a great night. I'm really tired,” he says through his hands.

She smiles at him. “It's okay. I guess I expected something... different. I work in fashion PR and it's a very surface thing, fancy secret restaurants with no names over the door, and being judged on your outfit, and nobody ever saying how they really are, how they really feel... I wasn't prepared for *real*. Or for walking,” she laughs. “Steve, I could have worn Converse. Oh my god. And you wouldn't even have cared.”

“I don't know what Converse are,” he says, still through his hands.

“Sneakers. You'd know them if you saw them,” Bree explains.

He peeks out from between his fingers. “You want to, uh, try again at some point? As friends,” he says. “But no secret fancy restaurants or being judged on your outfit.”

Bree smiles again, and she really was very pretty, in an angular, slightly startled-looking way. “Okay.”

They finish their dinner and Steve calls a cab to take her back to her place in Williamsburg.

He texts Natasha as he walks home.

SGR: I should have cancelled.

NAR: Ugh. Sorry. Janet really likes her. Maybe as a friend, though?

SGR: I dunno. That's where we left it but I'm not sure I'm going to get in touch with her again.

NAR: That bad?

SGR: No. Not really. Just not... not good. Not her. She was fine, I guess. Me, mostly.

NAR: You'll find someone good.

SGR: I'm beginning to doubt it. Night, Natasha. See you at debrief.

NAR: Night xx

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The next morning, Steve comes back from his run to find his bike won't start at all. He doesn't bother to change out of his running clothes to wheel it the four blocks to the bike shop, which was, thankfully, open. It was also clean and eerily quiet. The big double doors are open, and that plus the huge windows let in a ton of sunlight from the street onto a neat front office with white walls and a long counter, and then a partly-closed door to a much larger back area. In the window, the Indian gleamed, its chrome-work now bathed in the neon of the sign above it.

A pretty, curvy girl with long brown hair sits at the office counter, facing the door, tapping away at her phone and ignoring the laptop open next to her. She was maybe in her mid twenties, wearing a simple floral-print day dress. She had an arm full of jangly bracelets, and long nails coated in metallic-green polish. Her hair is clipped back on one side with a big yellow silk flower, and she chews on lips painted dark red-brown as she texts.

Steve comes in with his banged-up Harley and he hears a low whistle from somewhere in back, though he can't see anyone back there. At the sound of the whistle, the girl looks up, sees Steve's bike, and makes a face. "Oh my god, your Harley got in a fight," she says "And dude, I hate to break it to you, but I think it lost."

Steve smiles. "Nah. You should see the other guys."

The girls' eyes narrow as she looks at Steve for the first time. "I think I did, on the news."

"Can you fix it?" he asks.

"Fuck no," the girl says. She holds up her immaculately-painted nails. "And damage these babies?"

Steve stutters his confusion, pointing to the sign that clearly says BIKE REPAIR. "But--"

The girl slides off the stool she was sitting on and huffs out a sigh. "Okay, let's try this again." She sticks out her hand and Steve shook it. "Hi, I'm Darcy. I don't fix the bikes."

Darcy then opens the door to the back area. A chubby black pit bull with a white chest and socks comes waddling out, panting in the heat. Darcy points at the dog, who was making a beeline for Steve, wagging her tail so hard she looks like she is at risk of capsizing. "That's Pingu. She doesn't fix the bikes either."

Pingu the Pit Bull flops over onto her back at Steve's feet, showing a lot of white belly, and continues to wiggle so hard in delight that Steve can't help laughing at her.

Darcy just sighs. "Pingu, you are *such* a slut," she says, fondly. Then to Steve: "That dog has more

game than anyone in this whole neighborhood. Trust.”

Then she kneels down to Pingu and says, “Pingu, high five!”.

Pingu, still on her back, raises a front paw and smacks the hand that Darcy proffered.

“Who does fix the bikes?” Steve asks, leaning down to scratch Pingu's belly. He's rewarded with a series of pig-like snorts of ecstasy from the dog.

Darcy calls over her shoulder. “James! Harley with an owie. Several owies.”

There was a clanking sound from the back, of a heavy piece of metal being put down.

Darcy straightens up and her voice drops to a whisper. “Um, things you should know. James doesn't smile at new people, it's a Russian thing, it's not personal. In fact he kind of sucks at the whole making a good impression concept in general. If he offers you tea, don't drink it, it's disgusting. Other than that, he can fix any bike in the whole--”

But Steve doesn't hear the rest of what Darcy says, because then James walks in, distractedly flipping a monkey wrench in one hand.

And Steve feels his insides go into freefall.

James is *stunning*. Six feet of lean muscle and tattoos and piercing, pale-blue eyes, in an old, thin white t-shirt and faded Levis. The jeans hang low on his hips then hug tight over muscular thighs. His long, dark hair is drawn up into a messy twist at his nape, and held there with a rubber band. He's wearing old, half-laced hi-tops, and Steve idly thinks, *Converse*. Everything about his clothing is frayed and simple and comfortable, draped over a body that's as turbocharged as the racing bikes Steve can glimpse in the back workshop. It's a contrast that pulls at Steve, sending him off-balance, short of breath, in a way that nobody has since he woke up in this noisy, over-lit future.

James has a smudge of grease on his right cheekbone. A lock of his dark hair has escaped the band at his nape and instead brushes his jaw.

Steve has to shove his hands in his pockets to still the urge to wipe at the grease; to tuck the lock back behind his ear. He feels like his blood is fizzing, like he can feel every inch of the distance between him and James, his situational awareness going into overdrive.

The feeling isn't mutual.

James walks right past Steve like he isn't even there, and squats down facing away from him to look at the Harley.

His knees poke through holes in his faded jeans. His left arm has a complete sleeve tattoo, all wires and silvery plates like it was part of a jet engine. A shiny chrome robot arm topped with a red star on his deltoid muscle and a serial number on his forearm. Some words in cyrillic flank the serial number, designed to look etched into his arm, as if it were a coachbuilder's identification plate. His right shoulder has a black cat crawling down the upper arm, teeth bared, one paw on a crossed rifle and dagger, its tail wrapped around a torch. It looks like something from a military unit, and has an acronym in Cyrillic interwoven in the torch's flames. Steve's eyes then move to the broad back under the thin t-shirt, watching the play of muscles as James reaches forwards to touch the Harley's



engine.

James runs his index finger along the laser holes in the engine. "Jesus Christ." His Russian accent adds a sort of fierce music to the syllables.

Darcy rolls her eyes. "James, *manners*." Then she looks over at Steve. "I'm sorry but he was literally raised by bears so he has an excuse."

James grins up at Darcy, fond and relaxed, and if Steve thought he was gorgeous beforehand, his smile was *blinding*. It lit up the entire room and Steve wanted more than anything for that smile to be directed at him.

Steve absentmindedly shakes his head, trying to clear it. What is going on with him? The first time someone treats him like... like *normal*, not like Captain America, and he's suddenly wishing he's their best friend? Get a grip, Rogers.

Darcy fishes out a plastic container of what appear to be baby wipes from behind the counter and shoves them at James, clearing her throat meaningfully.

James puts down the wrench, takes a baby wipe, and wipes the grease off his hands. He extends his right hand to Steve and Steve takes it. James' handshake is strong, and Steve feels like James is looking right through him with those wide, pale eyes over those aristocratic cheekbones, which contrast so spectacularly with his body's powerful build and the silver, red and black ink down his arms.

It all falls to pieces when James opens his mouth, saying in a low, breathy growl, "Hi. James Barnes. I saw you on the news. Did you drive that back here from Roosevelt Island? If so you're an idiot."

Darcy facepalms.

"Babe," she moans, still hitting her forehead with her hand, "I've seen videos of you street racing. You don't get to call *anyone* an idiot for doing stupid things on a bike."

Steve can't tear his eyes away from that pale, unsettling gaze. "Hi. Steve Rogers." he manages, finally. "You're not the first person to tell me that."

James gets up and begins to wheel the Harley into the back. "Darcy," he calls. "Get me tea?"

"Uuuugh," Darcy groans.

James looks back over his shoulder at Steve, who hasn't moved. "Do you want some tea?"

Steve thinks of Darcy's dire warning against tea (she is at that very moment making desperate crossed arms x-means-no motions at Steve and shaking her head emphatically), and then thinks, *fuck it, live dangerously*.

"Sure," he says.

"Darcy, get our guest tea and cookies please." James waves an immaculately-inked arm at Darcy, then grabs the Harley by the handlebars and starts rolling it into the back of the shop.

Without looking at Steve, he says, "This way. Also next time, please come round the back. There were girls taking pictures of you through the window while we were talking. That must get tiresome. Go through the alley from King Street, it's the door with the red star. Usually open."

“Thanks,” Steve says, looking over his shoulder, and there are in fact a trio of teenage girls standing outside the store, watching him through the window and tapping away at their cellphones. He waves at them and flashes an awkward smile, before going into the back of the shop.

The back is a huge space, mostly exposed brick. A large, comfortable-looking, old-fashioned sofa is against the wall that divides the front and back of the shop. A workbench runs against the right-hand wall, scattered with tools and parts. Long windows over the counter give a view of a sunny alleyway which has a pickup truck and a small trailer parked in it. A spiral staircase sits in the back corner, presumably leading up to a living or storage area on the second floor. Around the space, on the cement floor or up on stands, are several bikes. A nice Triumph street bike and a couple custom racing jobs in various states of assembly. Something huge and powerful under a dust sheet that looks an awful lot to Steve like parachute silk. A vintage Vespa, robin's-egg blue.

Steve eases down onto the sofa, and Pingu paddles up onto the cushion next to him, flopping down with her big head in his lap. He watches as James clamps the front wheel of the Harley to secure it to a work stand, and hooks a stool with his foot to sit down on. He looks around and thinks to himself how the garage has surprisingly good natural light. How it would have made an amazing painting studio. How long it's been since Steve has drawn a damn thing.

His roaming eyes notice a bunch of trophies shoved underneath the workbench. A couple have fallen over. He finds that odd. Most places would have the trophies up front, on display.

Steve doesn't have much more time to think about it as Darcy appears with a mug of tea and a plate of cookies. As she puts them down on an upended wooden crate next to the sofa, she whispers to Steve, “It's okay if you don't drink the tea. He'll just use the leftover to de-grease engines.”

“Are the cookies safe?” Steve whispers back.

“You tell me,” says Darcy. “They're a new recipe I'm trying.”

The tea is very strong, very sweet, and very smoky. It's not nearly as bad as Darcy makes it out to be. It's very similar to the Lapsang Souchong that Peggy used to drink constantly, and its smoky, tarry taste reminds him of red lips, seamed stockings and a rapier wit. The cookies are amazing, cranberry-oatmeal and still hot from the oven, and Steve moans as he bites into the first one. He's going to eat the whole plate of them and he doesn't care who knows it.

But first, he's going to see about his bike. He gets up, wandering over towards the work stand where his poor Harley is sitting, his hands cupped around the mug of tea.

James looks up from his examination of the bike and pats the pockets of his jeans. “Darcy? Have you seen my wrench?” he says.

Darcy leans in from the front room, whistling. “Heads up!” she says, throwing the wrench in James' general direction... just in time for Steve to step into its path.

From behind him, Steve hears James' growled “fuck!” and he ducks, but suddenly a body barges in front of him and the wrench is grabbed before it can come into contact with his head. Steve stumbles, startled, and James puts an arm behind him, on his back, to steady him.

Close up, James smells like cinnamon and clean cotton and motor oil and musk. Steve suddenly wishes he'd showered; that he'd worn anything other than his dirty running clothes to drop the bike off. They're both a little startled, and there's a moment where they just stare at each other. James rakes those pale eyes over him, checking that he's okay, before grunting and stepping away, removing his hand as if he's burned it.

"Darcy, your aim remains terrible. Do not throw things." James says, walking back to the bike and spinning the wrench between his fingers again.

"Sorreeeee," Darcy cringes in the doorway. "Oh shit I almost brained Captain America i'm just going to go away for a while byeeee."

James sits down on the stool by Steve's bike, and taps the wrench against his hand. "So I can fix this. Give me two days. One day for parts, one day to put them in. You need a loaner?"

Steve is watching James' long fingers, the way they unconsciously manipulate the wrench. Only when the silence in the workshop lasts for a few seconds too long does he realise he's been asked a question, and he was supposed to answer. "Uh. What?" he says.

"You need to borrow a bike while I'm fixing yours?" James asks. "If so, you can take the Indian."

"No, I'm okay," says Steve. "Got nothing planned for the next couple days." He looks up at James, thinking, *I could make some plans. Maybe we could grab a burger or something*. Their eyes meet again for a moment and Steve is about to ask, when James looks down, away, blushing slightly, and turns back to the bike. Steve loses his nerve. The guy's obviously not interested in making friends.

"Give Darcy your number, we'll call when it's done," says James, already taking the cowlings off Steve's bike. Steve gets up to go, but freezes when James turns and glares at him. "Also, next time, don't drive a broken bike. *Please*. Call us. I'll come in the truck and pick it up. Yes?"

Steve felt annoyance flare up. What was wrong with his life, that even strangers were questioning his choices? "It's not necessary," he says, a little steel edging into his tone. "I can get myself home. Even if I can't, I heal fast."

James keeps staring at him and tilts his head. It's both adorable and... strangely intimidating, in a way Steve's not used to from civilians. "You are a soldier. So, healing fast doesn't mean less pain. It just means feeling pain more often. If you want to be an idiot, I can't stop you, but I pick bikes up for our other regulars all the time. Your choice."

"Um. Okay," Steve says. His mind can't stop turning over James' words. Usually when he said he healed fast, people would say he was lucky or that must be great or some other platitude. But James had somehow seen through all that to things that Steve didn't even want to admit to himself: that it made people take him for granted. That they assumed his wounds didn't hurt as much, because he got them so often. But they never stopped hurting. They always hurt just like the first time. What had Bree said? *I wasn't prepared for real*. Maybe she wasn't the only one living behind a veil of pretense.

James grunts and turns his back on him with a certain finality, focusing his attention on the damaged Harley.

Steve goes out to the front office and swaps numbers with a still very contrite Darcy. She's noticed that he ate all the cookies she'd given with the tea, so she thrusts a full tin of them into his hands, mumbling *sorry sorry sorry* and not meeting his eyes.

The teenage girls are still out front, and now they have autograph books. He ducks out the back.

It's the whole of the six blocks home until he stops feeling butterflies in his stomach.

Steve groans to himself as he unlocks his door to his bland apartment, his few possessions still mostly in boxes. *How do you make friends*, he asks himself, flopping down on his unmade bed. *I*

*don't think I know how to make friends with people outside work.*

It had never been much of a problem before. Not until he finally met someone he connected with. Not until James.

He wanted to be the one to make James smile. He wanted to hear what his laugh sounded like. He wanted to--

He wanted to run his hands up under that thin t-shirt to see if James' body was as hard and strong as it looked.

He wanted to tangle his fingers in that long dark hair and yank.

He wanted to know what James tasted like.

He *wanted*.

Oh.

*Oh.*

Steve palmed the growing, straining bulge in his sweatpants and bit his lip as a fiery warmth sparked up through his stomach and thighs. *Shit*, he thought, as his mind filled with images of ice-blue eyes and inked skin and red, bowed lips.

Just his luck to develop a crush on the local grease monkey, who was 1) straight and 2) apparently the only person in New York City not interested in Captain America.

## Chapter End Notes

So heyyyyyy welcome to my Stucky Big Bang 2016 fic! It's basically going to be a big angst and sex fest so, uh, strap in!

[Chapter title song](#). Yep it's gonna be all pop music all the time, IDGAF.

If you like this, I've got two other main series you may want to check out:

[The Murder Ballads](#), which is post-TWS BAMF!Bucky. So much violence. SO MUCH.

[Spotless](#), which is post CA:CW angst and fluff and sex.

[I'm also starting to put my fics on WattPad](#) (and soon starting to serialise an original novel there) so if WattPad is a thing you do, [here I am](#).

This is the Indian Scout in cherry red. Hi, baby:



# Police & Thieves

Chapter by [WeAreWolves](#)

## Chapter Summary

□

Race day, and what happens therein.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Of course, the day after Steve tells Darcy and James he won't need his bike, he gets called up by the Avengers. He can't take the subway today, can't stare at the ground and hunch his shoulders and avoid eye contact all the way to midtown, can't ignore the whispers that his supersoldier hearing delivers in perfect clarity even from the other end of a crowded subway car, *over there, look; it's Captain America; omg; he's smaller/larger/cuter/different in real life; do you think I should say hi*; can't let the click, click, click of cameraphone photos roll off him like they're not chipping away at his sanity.

And he'll die before he calls Tony and asks for a lift.

He sprints over to Red Star with his shield over his shoulder, hoping they're open and that the offer still stands to borrow a loaner bike. Darcy is behind the counter, squinting at a piece of notepaper, trying to copy something from it onto the laptop when Steve walks in. She's wearing a black cardigan with what looks like moth holes in it, and a t-shirt that says "Frankie Says Relax" in neon orange. Steve briefly wonders who Frankie is. The entire look is topped off, bizarrely, with a tiara.

"James here?" he asks.

"Duh, no, it's race day," she says, tilting the notepaper like maybe that will force it to make more sense. "But he did your bike already. Turns out he had most of the parts. I think some of them aren't Harley parts? If he put them in, they're probably better than what the bike already had. But if you're one of these purist types who's all matching serial numbers, just bring it back and he'll swap them out."

Steve breathes a sigh of relief. Pretty as the Indian was, he knew it wasn't quite as powerful as his old, dependable Harley, and he didn't exactly feel like learning the foibles of a new bike on the way to battle. "Great. How much do I owe you?"

"Dunno," Darcy shrugs. "James didn't leave an invoice. He gets super preoccupied on race days. Come back later in the week and ask him." She digs around under the counter and tosses Steve the keys to his bike. "It's in back."

"What does he race?" Steve asks, catching the keys one-handed despite Darcy's terrible throw. James is right. Darcy should not throw anything, ever.

"Open Grand Prix?" Darcy says. "It's kind of like racing and bike design at the same time. You can build or modify anything and race it, no limits on engine displacement or weight or whatever. They

usually show the OpenGP races on the ESPN extreme sports channel.” Darcy prods some keys on the laptop and squints at it. “I think he's in... New Jersey today. Yep! Joisey.”

“Do you watch?” Steve says, craning to see if the race is streaming on her laptop screen.

“Hell no. *Dude*. So many crashes,” Darcy says. “I can't handle it.” She tilts the screen so he can see the invoicing / parts ordering website she's on. “On race days I do all the super boring admin stuff and then stress bake and pray the phone doesn't ring to tell me he's dead, basically.”

“Okay,” Steve says, not expecting the weird feeling in his chest when Darcy talks about the risks of OpenGP racing. “Yeah.”

“*Yeah*,” Darcy breathes, serious and sad. “Come back later, if you're around. There's gonna be hella cupcakes.”

Steve walks into the back to look for his bike. Pingu is snoring, curled up in an improbably small ball, on the sofa. The big powerful bike hidden under parachute silk is gone, as is the pickup truck and trailer from the alley.

Steve sees his bike on the same work stand it was the previous day, but now looking as good as new. He lifts it down and wheels it into the alley. It starts right up, running as well as it did when he first bought it. He makes it over to Avengers Tower in midtown in twenty minutes.

\* \* \*

Steve's team lounge around the briefing room as Nick Fury briefs them and his #2, Phil Coulson, passes out the Eyes Only files. A biological weapon has been stolen from a military research base in Alabama, and the thieves – a team of European mercenaries led by a Frenchman named Batroc – are moving north to hand the weapon off to their buyer. SHIELD should know within the next 24 hours where the meet will take place, as they have an agent under cover with the buyer.

Fury prefers that the Avengers stay at the Tower and wait for the go sign, as they may get very little notice. Steve groans. They've all had more than enough practice waiting to be deployed. Superheroing was a lot like special ops work, or his time leading the Howling Commandos: days of boredom punctuated by minutes of sheer terror. Banner and Tony will load up on boxes of sushi from the catered spread on the table, and then disappear to a lab and spend the waiting time tinkering on their various projects. Sam will rush back to the VA on 23<sup>rd</sup> street to get in a few more hours of what he considers his “real work”. Thor's not around. Wanda and Vision are off working with Dr Strange on how she can use her powers more effectively. Clint gets up, cracks his back, checks the time on his phone, and heads straight for the big screen TV in the common area. He'll watch TV the whole time, sports or reality TV shows, volume turned all the way down and closed captioning on. Natasha follows, grabbing the small tablet she stores her books on. She'll get lost in whatever novel she's reading, or go spar. Every Avenger has their own waiting style.

Well, every Avenger except Steve. He mostly frets and goes over the briefing notes obsessively. But today he feels antsy than normal, uncomfortable in his skin, so he walks into the common area to ask Natasha if she wants to spar. And then he stops, and stares at what's playing on the big screen TV with the sound off.

Tony comes in behind Steve. “What are we watching?” he asks.

Natasha yawns, curled on the sofa next to Clint, and responds. "White boys crashing overpowered motorcycles."

"Stay and watch," Clint says. "This shit is *intense*."

"Clint Francis Barton: If you can fry it or crash it, he's probably a fan of it," Natasha sighs affectionately.

Clint pumps a fist in the air. "Cracker pride!" Then he brightens, as an ad pops up across the bottom of the screen. "Aw, and there's monster trucks on after this! You all have to watch monster trucks with me. It's the best. In fact, there's a monster truck rally at Madison Square Garden in 10 days. You all should come with me. We can go out for chicken-fried steak first and I can show you how real Americans eat."

"Alas, washing my hair that day," says Natasha.

"I have a research deadline," says Bruce, passing through on the way to the elevator. "Sorry, no can do."

Clint turns to Tony and Steve and raises an eyebrow. "Dudes? Monster trucks? C'mon, they're *excellent*."

Tony is still watching the race. "Jeez," he says, as a bike spins out and slams into a wall of tyres, "Do you win this race, or just survive it?"

Steve is just standing there, reading the info banners on the lower third of the screen as his heart pounds. *OpenGP. New Jersey Grand Prix*. It's the race James is doing. Is he one of those racers? Is that the only race? How do these things work? He has no idea which biker is James. They're all in jumpsuits with helmets, hunkered down over incredibly powerful bikes and leaning so far into the turns that it looks at any moment like their knees will scrape asphalt at over 200 miles per hour. Just thinking about it makes Steve shiver in discomfort.

"I can't believe people do this for *fun*," Steve says, sitting down next to Clint.

"Oh, man, these OpenGP guys are fucking nuts," agrees Clint. "They build bikes they can barely control then blast round a track at over 200 miles an hour and then-- *oh fuck!*" Clint says, as one rider miscalculates while overtaking the lead bike and bumps the front wheel of his opponent, sending them both spinning across the crowded track, the overtaking rider thrown high into the air as his bike flips, *don't be James, don't be James*, Steve thinks, the other rider sliding across hot asphalt towards the oncoming pack of racers – "*this happens, fuck, two bikes down, gonna be a third--*" Clint is clutching his hair, utterly engrossed in the unfolding high-speed pandemonium on the track, sparks and flying metal and bodies. Even Natasha has leaned forwards and lowered her tablet. Tony is agog over the back of the sofa, eyes wide and mouth slack.

One of the crashing bikes, the one that had flipped into the air, breaks apart on impact with the track as it lands, sending pieces of engine and cowling and a wheel across the track. Clint is half-standing, pointing to one bike without the usual clutter of sponsor logos, just a red number 7 on the racer's back, that is by bad luck headed straight into the worst of the crash area. "Holeee shit Barnes is finally gonna buy it, lucky Seven's gonna-- oh you *beast*." Clint shouts, as Number 7 steers the huge bike with his thighs and shoulders, changing its tilt and balance, neatly dodging the shattered pieces of metal flying towards him at two hundred miles an hour. "Fuck did you see him kick that chunk of flying bike shrapnel out of his way? Did I just imagine that or did he really do it? Because that thing changed trajectory somehow," Clint mutters.



“This is amazing,” Tony says, utterly rapt. “I want to design motorcycles. Jarvis! Wipe my project list. Steve, leave me your bike. I can do better than all of this. Steve?”

Steve isn't really listening. His heart feels like it's going to tear out of his chest; his cheeks are flushed. He can't tear his eyes off Number 7. Off James. He's sure it's James. No sponsor logos. Big black bike with red numbering. Black racing jumpsuit with a silver stripe down the side and a simple red 7 on the back. Lucky Seven.

Clint glances over at Steve and sees him watching Racer Number 7 as he aggressively uses the other riders' hesitation coming out of the crash area to move up past three opponents, into second place.

“You watching Barnes? Number 7?” Clint asks Steve, who nods, too much adrenaline pounding through his veins to do anything else. “Dude drives like a man with a death wish,” Clint says, his eyes returning to the screen. “Competitive racing bikers are normally 150lbs and about 5'6, he's over six feet and 200lbs, and he *still* manages to win races. He's a fucking god.”

“Steve? You okay?” Natasha asks, concerned.

Steve can't breathe. He's always been attracted to people who are good at things. It's one of the reasons he fell so hard for Peggy: not just beautiful, not just good, but good for something. Steve knows what it's like *not* to be able to be good at things; to have to work three times as hard as “normal” people just to run down the street or swing a baseball bat or climb a few flights of stairs.

So people who are healthy and don't bother trying to being good at anything? Steve doesn't see the point. But skill, determination, the work it takes to truly excel at something difficult and dangerous... Steve is sitting at the edge of his seat. Watching James race, he's not just good, he is *great*. He can't tell any more if the vise clutching at his chest is excitement, fear or desire, or some heady mix of all three. “I can't believe this is an actual sport shown on actual TV,” Steve murmurs, incredulous. “This belongs in some dystopian science fiction story, not, not real life.”

Clint snaps his fingers twice in Steve's direction. “*Death Race 2000*. Put it on your list. Oh, also *Rollerball*.”

“Ugh, I love *Death Race 2000*,” says Tony, and Clint puts out his fist towards Tony. “David Carradine!” they chorus, simultaneously, as their fists bump.

James wins the race. While the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> place finishers strip their jumpsuits down to their waists and spray champagne all over themselves and the sponsor girls in bikinis and spray-tan, James doesn't even take the neoprene dust mask off his face. He steps up onto the platform to accept the trophy. When James is next to the two other racers, Steve can see the size difference that was hidden when James was bent over the bike during the race. He looks huge beside them, his height and breadth emphasised by the almost intimidating simplicity of his jumpsuit, bereft as it was of sponsor logos.

Steve thinks about peeling that tight leather jumpsuit off James, unzipping it, and has to dig his fingernails into his palm.

“Uh, how come nobody sponsors the guy who, y'know, won the race?” asks Tony, pointing at James.

James takes the trophy, gives a little nod of acknowledgement, and leaves. Not once do his ice-blue eyes make contact with anyone. The other two bikers are still posing for photos with models, and drinking champagne out of their trophies.

“Oh. Because he's kind of a jerk, that's why,” says Tony.

Steve thinks of quietness and blushes and averted looks, and supprises himself by saying, “No. He's, he's just shy.”

Tony furrows his brow. “Steve. He's built like a Calvin Klein model and he's a top racer in a super-aggressive sport. How on earth can someone like that be shy?”

Steve looks down at himself, the big hands he's still not used to, the body that doesn't let him hide any more. “It's pretty easy, actually,” he murmurs.

\* \* \*

Steve sticks around and watches half the monster truck rally with Clint, and has to admit that watching the seemingly tinfoil bodies of monster trucks get crunched up is a lot more fun than he ever imagined. But his mind keeps going back to James in that mask and jumpsuit, his hair tangled and sweaty and blowing across his face after his helmet came off. His utter control in the race, and the terrifying power of the bikes they were racing.

Then, with no sign of the terrorists breaking cover, he decides to go home to Red Hook and actually get some real rest rather than staying on half-alert in the Tower the whole time, eating junk food. He doesn't feel as antsy now; somehow, watching the race had been cathartic.

It's just gone dark and Steve is coasting down Carroll Street on his motorcycle, most of the way home, when he hears a familiar voice shout “Steve!” from one of the bars. It's a nice night, and people are spilling out onto the sidewalk. He slows to a stop when he sees Darcy waving at him, her tiara sparkling in the streetlights. Old reggae music eases out from the bar she's standing outside; people further in are dancing. It's a nice place, with a simple wood bar and chairs that seem to have been scavenged from every thrift shop in Brooklyn. Hanging lights create warm pools of illumination here and there in them mostly dark interior. Simple, not very expensive. The sort of place were locals go, but outsiders pass by for not being scene enough. Steve is just fine with that.

“Did you recognise me, or the bike?” Steve asks Darcy, smiling.

“Pleading the fifth, your honour,” Darcy says, sticking her chin in the air and folding her arms. “Come in for a drink?”

“I don't drink, thanks,” Steve says, the refusal rolling out of him so easily. But then he thinks, *what else do I have to do?*

He parks his bike and walks up to where Darcy is standing in the mill of people on the sidewalk.

“Ugh, another one,” Darcy groans. “Save me from all these virtuous men. C'mon anyway! We won. We're celebrating. I'll buy you an iced tea.”

He smiles at her. “Is this the royal we?”

“Huh?” Darcy says, confused. “Oh, no, I managed to get James to come out. It's clearly the End Times.” She waves an arm, still covered in her artfully moth-eaten cardigan, towards the dance floor, where bodies move to an easy Rocksteady rhythm.

Steve looks over and can see James swaying to the song, hair down over his face, his body moving gracefully and easily to the beat. He's in all black, a slim v-necked t-shirt and skinny jeans that do frankly unfair things to his thighs and ass. Steve doesn't think about what those thighs were doing a few hours before; how they were wrapped around that huge black racing bike, controlling it effortlessly. He forces his eyes upwards to James' face.

Lost in the music, James looked so much younger. He can't be more than late twenties, Steve realises, but there's something about him that seems... older. *Says the man who's both 27 and 95 at the same time*, Steve thinks to himself. James raises an arm over his head, and his t-shirt lifts up, showing perfect, hard abs.

Steve very deliberately turns his back on the dance floor. He definitely doesn't think about what sort of noise James would make if Steve ran a fingernail down his chest, across one of his nipples: whether it would be a moan, or just a sharp little intake of breath. He follows Darcy into the crowd inside, and then something cold clutches his chest as she looks over at James, still dancing obliviously, and flashes a fond smile in his direction.

"Uh," he starts, as they find an open space near the bar and Darcy turns around to ask him what he wants to drink. "Are you two...?"

Darcy snorts derisively, and makes an *are you kidding me* face at Steve. "Nerd please. James isn't buying what I'm selling."

Darcy takes one look at the confusion on Steve's face and then rolls her eyes in amused exasperation. "He's all about the D. I mean, in theory. In reality he just goes upstairs and reads trashy sci-fi novels most nights. He's weird about his sexuality. I think it's why his family kicked him out. He has this really complicated family situation, I think he was adopted? I dunno. Anyway, for *once* I have managed to get him out after a race and we are all going to dance. C'mon!"

"I--" Steve begins.

Darcy gives him an encouraging smile as she grabs his bicep and drags him towards the dance floor. "It's reggae. *Anyone* can dance to reggae." Her enthusiasm is infectious, and Steve smiles back at her. *Is she a friend?* he wonders.

Steve wasn't a great dancer, but he wasn't a terrible one either. The main issue was that his body took up a *lot* of space, which made it hard on a crowded dance floor, especially to faster music. Combine that with years of being, well, *at war*, which meant being jostled or pushed by other dancers caused Steve to go on hyperalert and his adrenaline levels to go through the roof... it meant that dancing for him was usually something stressful, not the easy release that normal people found it. But the reggae and rocksteady had a pleasant tempo, and the floor was pleasantly full but not crowded.

Steve nodded to James as he Darcy started dancing. He leaned in and tried to say over the music, "Thanks for fixing my bike so fast," but James just tapped his ear and looked confused. Steve remembered that English wasn't his first language, and all the ambient noise didn't make it easy to hear. Plus, he was probably ex-Forces judging by the cat tattoo, and spent a lot of time around loud engines. So his hearing could be pretty shot. Steve taps James' arm and motions towards the sidewalk.

James follows, pausing to snag his jacket off the back of a chair. Steve is proud of himself for being forwards. There was so much he wanted to know about James, wanted to ask him. And Darcy had set up the perfect opportunity. He needed to thank Darcy for this, somehow. Maybe he should introduce her to Sam. He could definitely see the two of them hitting it off.

By the time they pushed their way through the crowd to the cool air outside, he's developed the "set Darcy up with Sam" plan into bringing her to brunch at the Tower next time Tony is out of town and Clint and Natasha are off on a mission.

So the first thing out of Steve's mouth to James is, "Is Darcy single?"

James looks a little startled. His eyes skate away and he tucks some of his loose (and, Steve sees, slightly wavy) hair behind his ear. It stays there for approximately a nanosecond before falling forwards against his cheekbone again. "Um. I think so."

"Okay. That's great. Thanks." So Operation: Brunch With Sam is a go.

James is quiet. He picks up a nearby, empty beer bottle and starts peeling the label off it. Steve gets a little lost watching his fingers again before he brings himself back to earth.

"So, um, Darcy said you were Russian." Steve says, leaning against the side of the building and sticking his hands in his pockets so he doesn't accidentally reach out and trail them through James' hair. "But you don't have a very Russian name."

James shrugs. "My Russian name's hard to pronounce in English. So I picked a new one when I came here." A ghost of a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "My immigration lawyer said, who do you want to be, in this new country? And I said *James Bond* as a joke. But my lawyer couldn't understand my accent and also had no sense of humour. He says okay, and writes down *James Barnes*. So here I am."

Steve laughs, and indicates the leather jacket James is wearing, black with a silver stripe down the arms like his racing jumpsuit, a large 7 on the back. His racing number. "Lucky number double-oh seven?"

"Something like that," James murmurs, blushing. His light Russian accent is the sexiest thing Steve has ever heard.

Steve takes a deep breath and tries to slow his heart rate. He looks over at the milling twenty-somethings gossiping and drinking on the sidewalk. All the people who are like him / not like him. "So, who's your favorite James Bond?" he asks. The James Bond films were one of the first things Tony made him watch, and he'll never forget Natasha sighing and eyerolling her way through them, muttering about tradecraft, but smiling the whole time.

James lets the curtain of hair fall down across his face again as he looks down at his feet. "You're going to think I'm trash," he says.

"No. Promise. Who?" says Steve, grinning at James. This is getting good.

"Roger Moore," James mutters.

"What? You're trash," Steve laughs. "It's clearly Sean Connery."

James turns towards him and folds his arms, mock-threatening, voice dropped to a growl. "Look, punk, all I need is the opening scene of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, with the British flag parachute. Often imitated. Never equalled." Then he runs his hands through his hair, his stance and voice softening. "Also I like that Roger Moore James Bond is ridiculous and over the top. I don't want to see grim things in movies. I don't want realistic violence. I've seen enough of the real thing. Don't want to spend 15 bucks to see it on screen."

"Amen," Steve says, because *yeah*. If he never sees the red-black stain of blood on pavement

again, he'll be happy. Without thinking, he raises his fist in the same gesture Clint always does, and is surprised when he feels James' fist bump up against his knuckles. It's a thing that normal people do. He's talking to someone and it's nice, and... easy. Aside from the part about wanting to drag him into the alley and shove him against the wall. He needs to stop thinking about that part or he'll ruin this, these first few tentative shoots of an actual friendship. "Hey you want a drink?" he says, suddenly conscious that they're the only two outside without some sort of social prop: a cigarette, a glass, or both.

"Oh, I don't drink," James replies, something apologetic in his voice.

"Me neither!" Steve says. He knows that sense of apology, that one more thing in a pile of things that seems to throw up an invisible wall between him and everyone else, makes him something people look at but can't engage with. "Doesn't affect me because of the serum. And I couldn't really drink when I was a teenager. Too sick."

"Huh. Is that so," James said, stopping and looking at him inquiringly. He's doing that head tilt thing again and Steve wants to run his thumb over those sharp cheekbones. "I've never had drugs or alcohol," James explains. "Me drunk would be... a bad idea."

"Ice tea, then?" Steve asks.

James shoves his hands in his jeans pockets, which pulls the waistband down below his hip points. "Cranberry juice?" he says.

Steve nods and they push towards the bar. Next to him, James says, "So, uh, what's your opinion of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*?"

"The Lazenby one?" Steve says. "It's okay, I guess." Truth be told, he can barely remember which one it was. The problem with catching up on seventy years of movies in 24 months is that they all blend together somewhat. Especially the Bond films.

Steve startles as he feels James' hand close around his bicep like an iron band, stopping him. James is standing, looking like an immovable object in the sea of people around the bar, his mouth open in shock. "Rogers. No." James pulls him a step closer, so he doesn't have to shout. He's *strong*, but then he spends his time wrestling overpowered motorcycles around a track at unsafe speeds. "*It's okay, I guess* is not how to describe the greatest and most tragic of the Bond films. He finally has everything he wants. He is given a way out of killing. He can *stop*. And then, just when he finally has happiness, everything that matters to him is taken away. He has to go back to being full of nothing but broken glass again, and it's so much worse because now he knows what it's like to be a real person."

Steve blinks, and thinks of red lips, seamed stockings, and a rapier wit. He feels the beginnings of tears prick at the corners of his eyes.

James lets go of his arm as if he's been caught stealing. "I.. uh, sorry," he says, his body language closing off, his strange, heartbreaking shyness taking over again. He steps backwards and buries his hands in his hair. "I watch too many movies."

"No, it's okay," Steve says. "What you said, I just didn't expect... It was beautiful."

They look at each other for a moment, both blushing. Steve breaks first. He points to the bar. "Uh. Drinks." James licks his lips and nods.

Steve turns to push in to the bar and get the bartender's attention. It's packed, so they'll have to wait.

In front of them are a couple Wall Street types. He's still in an expensive suit, tie loosened. Small, nasty eyes and an air of superiority. She looks like a secretary: highlighted long hair, high heels, a nice sheath dress and a bit of an idol complex as she gazes up at him. They have their drinks but they aren't moving away from the bar area, just blocking everyone else's access to it.

Steve is about to move further down the bar to an easier spot when he sees the guy palm a tablet into the girl's Corona Lite. Cold fury grips him. He touches James' forearm, and hisses, "that scumbag just dosed that girl's drink. You get the girl out of here and I'm gonna read the guy the riot act."

James grabs Steve's wrist. "No," he breathes.

Steve rounds on James, thinks that James doesn't want to get involved. Until James stutters out, "No, Steve, look at me." He indicates the tattoos, the long hair. "There is no way a girl like that is going to talk to me, much less feel comfortable walking out of a bar with me. You take her and explain. You're Captain America; she'll assume you're safe. Let me deal with the guy."

Steve looks at him, eyes wide, and part of him wants to grab James and say, *if that girl wouldn't want to talk to you she's either blind or an idiot or both*, but instead he just nods and introduces himself to the girl. Behind his back, he hears the businessman's angry "Hey!" as James liberates the girl's Corona Lite and wedges himself in to the bar to loom over him. The guy in the suit's maybe 5'8" and works out, but has nothing on James.

The girl is thrilled to meet Captain America and looks at Steve with big eyes. She twists a manicured finger in her long hair as he links his arm in hers and pulls her a few steps away. She gasps appropriately when Steve tells her about the dosed drink. She says she's a temp at an investment bank, and that guy is her boss. *What's going to happen to him*, she asks, as Steve guides her towards the exit with a hand on her lower back. Steve glances back to check on James.

James is smiling a smile which isn't nice at all. Steve can see a mean little black fighting knife in James' hand, being turned over his fingers with the same dexterity as he handles the monkey wrench. He's holding it carefully, so nobody will notice it unless, like Steve, they're trained to look for weapons. He's forcing the businessman to drink the Corona Lite he drugged. Steve watches, rapt. He can understand now why James thought the girl might not agree to leave with him. It's like everything about him has... shifted. He looks *dangerous*. The businessman is taut, stressed, desperate for an escape route. James is completely relaxed, like a panther playing with its prey. Steve's groin chooses to react to this in highly inappropriate ways, and Steve forces his eyes back to the girl. She simpers at him and flips her hair.

Steve smiles a wan smile at her. "It looks like your boss is getting a taste of his own medicine." The girl giggles and grabs onto his jacket. All Steve wants to do is drop the girl off and get back to the bar. James was opening up, and there were so many things he wanted to ask about. The racing. The meaning of his tattoos. Or maybe just drag him back to the dance floor and not talk at all. Or, *fuck*, into the nearest alley. But as soon as he gets halfway to the subway with the girl, he gets the call: the terrorists are moving.

\* \* \*

"What are you doing?" Darcy asks, coming up behind James, surprised to find him at the bar. She has her handbag and her jacket, like she's on her way home. About time, James thinks, as he can feel her swaying behind him. She'd been sucking down margaritas like they were going out of

style, and all that tequila had clearly come home to roost.

“Taking out some trash,” James says. He doesn't take his eyes off the businessman, who is slowing and looking glassy-eyed at the third of the drugged beer remaining in the bottle. He drops his knife so the point falls between the businessman's fingers on the bar. The man startles and raises the bottle to his lips again.

“Oh. Steve go home?” Darcy says, craning her neck around.

James glances over towards the street. Steve and the pretty secretary are arm in arm. He is smiling at her and she is laughing up at him, as they walk towards Steve's bike. Steve doesn't look back at all, as he drives off with the girl's arms wrapped around his waist and her head tucked between his shoulder blades.

James sighs. He had a Steve Rogers problem. Steve Rogers, with his too-tight shirts and ridiculous biceps and green-blue eyes, his perfect, perfect face that can't actually exist on a real human being... and his obvious, total straightness.

Going out was a mistake, James thinks. He was always a weird, emotional mess of adrenaline hangover after races and reading or watching movies at home was a much better way of coming down off--

James is brought back into the moment by a loud yelp and a crackle of electricity. His eyes widen at Darcy, who is giggling. “Darcy, did you just--”

“Yep,” she says, proudly holding up her Taser, as the businessman writhes on the floor, whining. “He put his hand on my ass.”

“Darcy! You can't just tase people. They'll call the cops. I can't get arrested. I'm still on a green card,” James hissed.

“Oh. Shit.” Darcy said, swaying and unfocused. “Sorry, dude. What should we do?”

James grabs her arm. “We leave. Now.”

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter title song: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nz\\_uSssKTW](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nz_uSssKTW) (note: technically reggae, not rocksteady, don't sue)

Note: my schedule is really weird for the next few weeks. Don't expect such frequent updates going forwards. I just opened this chapter up to fiddle with one paragraph this am and 2,000 words later welp here it is

Now over to pictures of hot motorcycles!

There is no such thing as OpenGP. I've loosely based it on a US circuit-only version of MotoGP.

The bikes are beasts:





The leaning in on the corners is super scary, especially as average race speeds are 180-225mph depending on the track: □

And there's a ton of argybargy:



There are also lots of spectacular crashes which, if you like looking at such things, are easily found by googling “MotoGP crash”

And: FYI: Clinton Francis Barton is 110% correct, monster trucks rule. Get over your middle-class self.

# Scar That Never Heals

Chapter by [WeAreWolves](#)

## Chapter Summary

In which Tony Stark is both redeemer and destroyer.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chasing Batroc and his crew took the Avengers all night. They finally caught them, and the biological weapon, holed up in a children's hospital near the Jersey shore. Nobody was killed. OK. Zero killed, oh-k, *okay*, and Steve was going to focus on that. Not the terrified six-year-olds, heads shaved from chemo treatments, who the terrorists had used as human shields. Not the nurse who got shot in the gut when she tried to protect a particularly weak patient with her body. Everything is OK.

His bike is trashed again, though. Three of the terrorists had made a break for it in an SUV, with the weapon, while Batroc distracted Tony and Sam. Steve had been all out of fucks to give at that point and just rammed the SUV with his bike, flipping over the vehicle and slamming the edge of his shield into the roof so he could hold on while he kicked his way through the windshield and knocked the driver out.

But they brought the terrorists down. They'd already brought down Batroc twice before, and maybe this time it would stick. Or maybe it would be just like all the other times: he'd get bailed out, or escape, or do a deal with the government, and a year or so later they'd be doing all this again somewhere else: Madripoor. Buenos Aires. Omaha.

Nobody felt particularly elated, in the grey pre-dawn light of the pine barrens as the SHIELD armored vans left with the captured terrorists. No high-fives, no hugs. Just tired people who had been up all night, nursing sprains and bruises and a bullet wound or two, standing at the far end of a hospital parking lot in a forgettable Jersey town.

Clint was the first to bail. He raised a hand in goodbye, then limped into Natasha's car, grumbling about breakfast, and they headed back up towards New York City via probably every rest stop on the turnpike, knowing Clint. Sam gave a cheery wave and took off into the air, back to his apartment to shower and make it to his desk at the VA for 9am. Bruce had sat this one out, the special ops-type pursuit work not a good fit for the Other Guy. That left only Tony and Steve to watch the sun rise over broken glass yet again, and wait for the emergency crews and their red and blue lights.

Steve rubs his eyes and looks down at his mangled bike. And thinks about muscular, tattooed arms and jeans riding low over slim hips. He pulls out his phone.

"Ugh. Jersey? What are you doing to me, Rogers," comes the rough, sleepy voice at the other end of the line. Then, "be there in an hour." Steve only realises it's 5am after he hangs up.

"Steve. I'll call a quinjet," says Tony, opening the faceplate of his suit.

“Which will be here in an hour, too,” says Steve, sitting wearily down on the curb. “I just want to go home, Tony.”

“I can carry you,” says Tony. “I’ll even go to Red Hook, if you promise never to tell anyone. Leave the bike here. I’ll buy you a new one. It’s okay. You saved the world, or at least Central New Jersey. You can have a new bike.”

Steve just shakes his head. He strips off his cowl and unbuckles his uniform shirt, and slipping it over his head. It felt good to let the cold morning air wash away the sweat and stress.

“You know they say that PTSD is so much worse these days because of how quickly soldiers come back from war?” Steve says, dragging the toe of his boot through a scattering of aqua safety glass and silvery bullet casings. They tinkle and crack against his foot. “In my day we went by ship, so it could take weeks, even a month. Soldiers had time to process what had happened; get used to not being in combat any more. Now, one day you’re in a war zone, the next day you’re in a Wal-Mart.”

“Makes sense,” Tony says, pressing a button under the gauntlet of his Iron Man suit and causing the whole thing to fold away from him, like some complicated origami, until after a few seconds Tony can step out of it and it packs down into a flashy, gold and red rectangle not much larger than a suitcase. “I was in a Wal-Mart once. I definitely got PTSD from the experience.” He stretches, cracking his back, and groans. “You want to go get some breakfast?”

“I think I just want to sit here for a while and be quiet, Tony. Thanks, though.”

Tony puts his hand on Steve’s shoulder for a moment, which was as close as Tony gets to a hug.

A few minutes pass, then Tony says, “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

Steve looks at him, confused.

“You can take a break,” Tony says, sitting down next to him on the curb. “C’mon, Steve. You fought a war and got frozen and woke up in the future and went straight back to being Captain America and fighting the good fight and you haven’t stopped for breath since. I spent a couple months in a cave in Afghanistan and then three years in therapy. Jesus, I still-- you know what ‘going to Malibu’ is, right?”

Steve shakes his head.

Tony looks up, right at Steve, his brown eyes wide and vulnerable, the age lines around them even more visible thanks to the sweat and dirt of battle. “It’s code for I lie on my beach-house floor and have a mini-breakdown for somewhere between three days and a week. *That’s* what happens in Malibu. That’s why I never invite any of you to come with me. But if I didn’t have Malibu, I’d have shattered into a million pieces a long time ago.”

“I-- I didn’t know, Tony,” Steve says. Tony always seemed so... together. Manic, perhaps, but together. He does more than any of them: invents, runs (with Pepper, admittedly) a multi-billion-dollar company, is an Avenger.

Tony waves a hand at Steve, *don’t pity me*, then rubs his face. “It’s okay to not fight for a while, Cap. The world isn’t going to self-destruct if you put down the shield and go hang out on a beach for a month or two. Or forever.” He smiles. “You need to find your Malibu.”

“Captain America is important, Tony. He can’t just... disappear,” Steve says.

Tony looks at him, serious. “Steve Rogers is important too, and that guy is fading away in front of

my very eyes.”

Steve stares down at the cracks in the pavement; the leaves of grass trying to push through. “You don't have to wait with me.”

“I know. But I want to,” he says. “You're my friend.” He pulls out his phone. “You want a coffee?”

“Yeah. Love one.”

Tony calls his office and has someone call the Starbucks a few miles down the street to deliver them coffee.

\* \* \*

James pulls up in his battered red-and-white F150 about 40 minutes later. Tony folds his arms. “Still can't believe you're letting some local Brooklyn grease monkey fix your bike. I mean, I have my genius and billions of dollars and state-of-the-art labs. What does this *mechanic* of yours have that I don't?”

James gets out of the truck and waves a shy hello. He's a mess: hair uncombed and falling over his face; stubble shadowing his jaw; t-shirt on inside out under an old flannel shirt full of holes; dirty, oil-smeared jeans. Steve's stomach twists sharply with desire, and he averts his eyes.

“...oh,” Tony says. “Y'know, ten years ago I woke up looking that good too.”

Steve snorts. “No, you didn't, Tony.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Tony admits. “Still, looks fade, genius doesn't. Unless you get Alzheimer's. Which doesn't actually run in my family, thank God. Steve, are you bi?”

Steve grabs one of the extra coffees and walks over and shoves it into James' hand. “Hey. Thanks. Um, your shirt is on inside out.”

James looks down at himself. “Oh,” he says. Then he blinks his long lashes, his eyes ice-pale in the low morning light. “Where's your bike? I have to be back in time to open up the shop.”

Steve points and James gives him a mock-exasperated look at the sight of the damaged Harley. Then he hops back in his pickup and reverses the truck over to the bike.

Tony chatters away to Steve, asking about James, trying to get Steve to comment on his sexuality, scheduling debriefs, and generally also trying to insert himself into the entire bike-fixing process. Steve knows Tony means well; he is very protective of the few people he considers friends and that can manifest itself in what little filter Tony has between his brain and mouth completely vanishing. Plus, Tony's natural pull towards anything mechanical or engineering-related. But Steve feels a sudden wave of selfishness, of wanting to have a friend who has nothing to do with Captain America or SHIELD or the Avengers. James is *his*. Though all he wants to do is watch James work, watch him load the bike, he turns his back and uses his oversized frame to block Tony's view too.

So he misses the part where James swears at himself for forgetting his ramps, glances up to see if anyone is watching him, then leans down from the bed of the pickup truck, grabs the 480lb

motorcycle, and hefts it into the back of the truck. He clamps down the front wheel and ties the bike down, then hops out of the bed.

“Ready to go,” James mumbles, leaning against the cab of the truck.

“Okay. See you, Tony,” says Steve.

James climbs back into the pickup and starts it up.

Steve opens the passenger door and James mutters an “oh, shit,” as he realises the amount of crap that’s scattered around the passenger area: a pair of racing boots, calendars and programmes, protein bar wrappers, crumpled saran wrap still bearing crumbs of old sandwiches, empty Gatorade bottles, colourful parking passes with the word COMPETITOR on them. His eyes dart around but there’s nowhere in the cab of the pickup to shove all the crap, once Steve and his shield occupy the passenger seat. James at last just groans and shoves it all into the seatwell. “Sorry it’s such a mess,” he says. “Don’t normally have company.”

Steve smiles and gets in. “No, it’s... it’s fine. I exist in quinjets and hotel rooms and briefing rooms and Tony Stark’s tower which has an army of people picking up anything that’s dropped almost before it hits the ground. This is nice. It’s... normal.”

James’ lips quirk into his little ghost-smile as he shifts the truck into reverse. “Everywhere you go smells like fresh paint, eh?”

“Yeah,” says Steve, trying to ignore the fact that James has thrown an arm over the back of the seat as he turns to look out the rear window while backing up. Trying to ignore how fingers just brushed the back of his neck.

The arm doesn’t stay, which is probably a good thing for Steve’s heart rate.

James is silent on the way back to the turnpike, except to gesture vaguely at the radio and say, “if you want music...”

Steve just shakes his head and leans back, watching New Jersey roll past through the window. And this quiet, the hum of the engine, the in-betweenness of the space, it sends everything that Steve has been shoving down, everything he’s been ignoring, back up to the surface. He’s too exhausted for that brittle surface to hold. Before he knows what’s happening, he’s crying. He shuts his eyes and sees terrified children and broken glass and bullet casings and red light, blue light.

He can’t get his mind off Tony’s words. He’s just so *tired*. He doesn’t want to do this any more. What good is it doing, when it’s always the same people, again and again? Is any of it worthwhile? When will his war end?

He turns his face more towards the window, thinking he can hide the tears flooding down his cheeks. Because now that he’s started crying, he can’t stop. He swallows the sobs as best he can.

He doesn’t notice when James pulls off at the next exit and onto a two-lane back road; doesn’t notice when the truck comes to a halt at a stop sign. He only notices when two warm, muscular arms wrap around him and guide his head around to rest against a tattooed shoulder. When an old, soft flannel shirt is pressed into his hands, to wipe his cheeks. When a hand rubs circles on his back, and a low, rough voice says, “ssh, it will pass. It’s not okay, but it will pass.”

“I’m-- I’m sorry,” Steve chokes out, a hot flush of embarrassment colouring his cheeks.

“No reason to be sorry,” James says, still rubbing Steve’s back. He smells of smoky tea and

cinnamon and clean laundry and sweat. "Crying is not weakness. Tears are just love that has nowhere else to go. Let it out. Let it go into the world."

And Steve does, in great, shuddering sobs, his face buried in the flannel shirt, getting snot and tears all over it. He feels protected, and safe, resting in the solid circle of this near-stranger's arms, shaking and sobbing out the stress of 70 years of war.

As Steve feels he is getting his breath under control, James moves his hands up Steve's back and around to his face, wiping the last tears away with his thumbs. James' hands are warm and rough, and feel so good against his cheeks. Steve shuts his eyes for a moment. He opens them, and James is looking at him in a way Steve can't quite pinpoint, those pale-blue eyes gazing into his. Steve's glance flicks down to James' lips, open slightly, a question on them. Steve wonders what it would feel like to drag his mouth across the perfect cupid's-bow of the other man's lips.

James glances down to Steve's mouth, nervous, and licks his lips. Was that an invitation? Steve feels a shiver go down his chest, and as he begins to lean forwards, tilting his head, time slowing like molasses--

--someone bangs a fist on the tailgate of the truck.

"Yo, the fuck you doing, this look like a parking lot?" comes a loud male voice.

James sighs and reluctantly withdraws his hands from around Steve. "Fucking Jersey drivers," he mutters, easing himself out of the truck like a very graceful and very angry cat. Steve covers his face with the flannel even more, and scooches down in the seat so he can't be seen through the back window. He can see the headlines in his mind already: *Captain America breakdown!* or *Mental health worries for Avenger!*. Wouldn't be the first time.

He doesn't even want to think about the media shitstorm that will happen if/when the world finds out he's bisexual. He knows all he has to do is shut up and not say anything, and eventually the gossip cycle will move on to somebody else but... if James is interested, would he be willing to deal with the circus that dating Captain America would entail? Steve isn't sure. Heck, he's not even sure *he* wants to deal with the circus that dating would entail. And James seems so... private.

Steve still doesn't even know if James *is* interested. But God, he *wants* James to be. He's had very few people in his life that he's felt romantically inclined towards, male or female, and though he's always appreciated men, his only experience with them had been his drawing teacher at Cooper Union, before the war, a tall expatriate Brit with sad eyes and long fingers. After that was the serum and Peggy and then... ice.

His reverie is broken by the guy from the car behind him yelling as James approaches, "You wanna park, park that hunk of junk on the fuckin' shoulder!"

Then he hears James' voice, saying something in Russian, nasty and guttural and with a threat behind it that needed no translation. There's the crunching sound of something being kicked.

The other guy starts talking more quietly, "Okay, buddy, okay, sorry, just chill out--"

Then another sound of crunching metal, and James switches to English: "Don't ever touch my truck again. And learn patience."

James gets back in, says, "fucking Jersey" again, then pulls a U-turn to take them back to the turnpike. The other vehicle, a dented-up Jeep Cherokee with a (newly?) busted headlight, hasn't

moved, the owner cowering behind the steering wheel and looking anywhere but at James.

“What did you say to him?” Steve asks.

“Oh, it's not translatable,” James says. “Very filthy. But swearing at people in Russian usually makes them go away. Also makes me feel better.”

Steve couldn't help giving James a Captain America look as he asks, “Did you... damage his car?”

James gives his little ghost-smile again and, without taking his eyes off the road, holds up his thumb and index finger: *little bit*. “Nothing expensive, Captain. Now go away. I want Steve back.”

Steve snorts, then finds himself laughing. It's his first laugh since... since last night, when he and James had been talking about James Bond movies.

James pulls in to a gas station near the onramp, disappears into the store, and comes back with two litre bottles of cold water, one of which he hands to Steve, along with a candy bar. The water is delicious; Steve hadn't realised how thirsty he was until he takes a sip, and he soon downs it all. He looks at the empty bottle and James rolls his eyes and says, “just throw it in the seat well with all the other crap.”

Steve does, and feels more of a thrill than he should for such a petty act of irresponsibility. He feels... God, he feels so much *better*. Like a weight has evaporated from him. He's still tired and frayed at the edges, and his eyes are stiff with dried tears, but now Brooklyn is sunny and he no longer feels like he wants to die, at least not today.

“I ruined your shirt,” Steve says, looking at the crusty mess that James' flannel had become.

“I have a washing machine,” James replies. As they go over the Verrazano Bridge, he says, “You want to go home?”

Steve shakes his head. “Mind if I just come to the shop for a while?”

James shrugs. “Only if you can keep Pingu from lying down on whatever I'm working on. She likes to help, but she's a terrible mechanic.”

“I'll take that mission. Pingu likes me.” Steve's eyes catch on the black cat tattoo on James' right shoulder, where it peeks out from under the arm of his inside-out t-shirt. At first he thought it was a panther, but no, it's definitely a cat, its eyes blue like James'. “What's this?” he asks, touching the tattoo.

James stiffens almost imperceptibly, and shifts away. “My old unit,” he says.

“Oh, were you in the military?” Steve wonders if the Russian Army has the equivalent of MOS numbers, and if he can get James to tell him what his was.

James nods, visibly closing down. “In Russia. Everybody does military service. No big deal.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, “but let's just say Logistics Corps doesn't usually get snazzy snarling-cat tattoos.”

“I dunno, you haven't met many Russian quartermasters, have you?” There is a slight edge, a finality to James' reply, even though it was phrased as a joke. Steve knows that sort of finality; he's heard it from Clint and Natasha enough times, from Nick Fury. Heck, he'd use it himself when the wrong people asked about the Howling Commandos. If he presses James further, he knows he'll

just get more deflections, or eventually be told “classified”, or whatever the Russian equivalent of that was.

Still, looking down at the tattoo, he was sure it was for a specialist unit. There was something about the way James moved, a certain spatial awareness, and that was perhaps why it felt so familiar to Steve, why it felt like home: it was the way a special-ops soldier moved, and a damn good one.

He'd ask Natasha about the tattoo. She'd know.

They're back in Brooklyn for 8am. James opens up the shop and makes tea, which isn't teabag-in-a-mug tea like Steve was used to in the US, or pot tea like Peggy would make. It was a big, constantly boiling kettle of hot water and then a jar of incredibly strong, tarry... condensed tea, for lack of a better way of expressing it. And somehow jam, which utterly confused Steve.

James chuckles to himself at Steve's confusion and got out two large blue mugs, putting a spoonful of jam in each, then some of the tea-tar, then hot water, and handing one to him. “Here. Don't judge me until you've tried it.”

Steve laughs. “Sorry. You want a hand getting the bike in?” he asks, walking towards the back door to where the truck was parked in the alley.

“Yes, but nothing is going to happen until I have some tea. I'm not a morning person,” James says, yawning, and Steve notices again how rumpled and sleepy he looks. Which leads to thoughts of what James would look like in bed. Naked. In white sheets, the early-morning light in his eyes. And that leads to Steve definitely not thinking about James' cock, and whether it's cut or not, how thick it is, what it might feel like in his hand. In his *mouth*.

“Sorry,” Steve says, for so, so many things, including the images going through his brain at that very moment. He mustn't blush. In fact, he needs to go sit down on the sofa. Immediately.

“Stop apologising,” James says, walking up the spiral staircase and opening the door to what must be his apartment above. Pingu comes barrelling down, nearly tripping over herself as she wiggles ecstatically. He then escorts her out the back door, muttering “out you go,” and toeing a loose brick against the door to keep it propped open. His hands are still cupped around his own mug of tea like a lifeline. Pingu relieves herself on the alley's cobblestones then waddles back in to rub figure-eights through Steve's legs.

Darcy comes in a few minutes later (bright red suede platform sandals, cut-off denim miniskirt, Van Halen t-shirt and the sort of straw hat that racetrack bookies used to wear), calls a lazy “hey” in James' general direction, sees Steve, does a double-take, says, “*heyyy*” again in a completely different tone of voice, and then notices the mug in Steve's hand and cries out, “oh my god Steve it's not worth it, put the tea down, you're much too young to die. I'll make you coffee, *please*.”

James rolls his eyes, flips her off, put his own now-empty mug down on the worktable and goes out to get Steve's bike.

“Ssh,” Steve says, “I'm going to try it.”

Darcy moans and covers her eyes.

The tea was... even nicer the second time. Less sugary. Of course, Peggy had positively functioned on an intravenous drip of smoky Chinese teas so Steve was more accustomed to the concept of



bitter, smoky tea than most Americans. And he couldn't taste the jam at all, except as a slight raspberry-tinged sweetness. It wouldn't be something he'd make in his own apartment, but it was pleasant enough here. And James had made it for him, so there was that. "I like it," he says finally.

"Ugh," Darcy says. "One drive in the Frat-150 and you have Stockholm Syndrome already. I think it's all the protein-shake dust in there, it causes brain chemistry malfunctions." Then she grabs a couple canvas tote bags from the front and yells in James' general direction, "I'm gonna borrow your oven to test a cookie recipe, okay?"

"No, Darcy, don't bake me cookies, I don't want that at all," James yells back as he wheels Steve's broken bike inside. He looks over at Steve and explains: "She wants to open a bakery shop. On weekends she sells at all these farmers' markets. And my oven is nicer than the one in her apartment, so, free cookies."

"I might never leave," Steve says, sliding down from the sofa onto the cool cement floor to allow Pingu better access to his lap.

\* \* \*

Except an hour later, Tony shows up.

Darcy had just brought plates of warm cookies downstairs for all of them and sat down in the front to do the invoicing when he swanned in wearing dirty jeans, gold Versace sunglasses, a Black Sabbath t-shirt and his *I'm Tony Stark, I go wherever I want* attitude. In this case, however, it's "I'm Tony Stark, and I'm here to see James Barnes."

He doesn't even slow down as he walks past Darcy, her face going from welcoming to angry to flummoxed. It's a fairly standard reaction to The Tony Stark Experience™.

Steve suddenly wants to die again.

"You the James Barnes that won the OpenGP race in Millville yesterday?" Tony says, hands shoved in pockets, weight rocked back on his Cuban heels like he owned the place.

James nods warily, starting to flip the socket wrench in his hand as he stands.

"Thought you looked familiar. Couldn't really tell because of the mask, but the whole murder-eyes thing you have going is pretty unforgettable. How come you don't have a sponsor?" Tony continues.

"They aren't interested in me. I make do." James rolls his shoulders, loosening them. The gesture isn't lost on Steve, nor is the subtle way James shifts his stance from something casual to something more... coiled. Yeah, Steve thinks, he's had a lot of very specialist training.

But it's all apparently lost on Tony, who canters on with his interrogation, oblivious. "How many races did you win last season?"

"Can't. Remember," James replies, tilting his head, enunciating each word with very specific menace.

"Seven out of twelve, and it would have been more but grumpypants got a three-race suspension

for being an asshole,” calls Darcy from the front.

“Darcy...” James groans and presses his palm against his forehead. “Martoni tried to run me off the track. I returned the favour, with interest.”

“So you win more than half the races you enter? Great. I'll sponsor you. Stark Industries.” Tony pulls out a chequebook.

“No, thank you, that's very nice of you to offer, but... no sponsors,” James says.

Tony looks shocked. “What, do you hate money? Don't tell me you're an *actual* communist or something.” Tony's eyes dart to the big racing bike under its parachute-silk dust cloth in a corner of the garage, and he strides towards it. “Because let's also not forget that I'm one of the world's foremost engineering geniuses and kid, I'm sure you're doing fine, but I can help you do better.”

Tony pulls the dust cloth off the competition bike and James somehow manages to insert himself between Tony and it, so Tony can't get a clear look, and is using his size and an aggressive use of spatial proximity to back Tony away. “No, thank you. Please leave,” James growls.

“Oh, hey, you're *tall*. Cap, he taller than you?” Tony takes a step backwards then peeks around James to look at the bike, which has all its outer cowlings dismantled and its insides on full view as race-worn parts are tested and swapped out. “Jesus Christ, that's not a bike, that's a rocketship. Can you really control that thing?” Tony turns around again, sniffing. “Also why does your garage smell like gingerbread? I've been in a lot of garages in my time and none of them smell this good.”

Steve dislodges Pingu, gets up and brings Tony the plate of cookies. “If I give you a cookie, will you go away?” says Steve, only half-joking. He glances over Tony's shoulder. James has already thrown the dust cloth back over his racing bike.

Tony takes a cookie and bites into it. “Nope,” he says, his mouth full. “Good cookies, though.”

“Thank you!” calls Darcy. “I do catering, and deliver.”

“Tony, what are you doing,” Steve asks, quietly.

“Look. You're my friend,” Tony whispers. “I just want to make sure Red Menace over there isn't actually a serial killer, or some sort of Hydra plant that's going to sabotage your bike.”

“I'm not going to sabotage his bike,” says James, arms folded, as he materialises next to Tony.

“Oh god, you're as bad as Nat,” Tony says, startling. “Also, that's just what a saboteur would say.”

Then he takes his sunglasses off and tilts his head back to look James in the eye as best he can. “Okay, James Barnes, so you're a bit of an immigrant success story. Arrive from Mother Russia, in two years you own your own building in Brooklyn (or at least your offshore holding company does, nice one, all the best people et cetera) and you're competing in a race circuit where the average bike cost is a couple million dollars.” Tony raises his eyebrows questioningly.

“You're not the only one with family money,” James says, his voice tense and hostile.

“Yes, but *which* family--” Tony starts.

“Okay, that's it,” Steve says, taking Tony by the arm. “We're leaving. Sorry for the disturbance.”

James shrugs, as if to say, *doesn't matter*, but he's closed down again, eyes cold and narrow.

“Wait,” Tony says, twisting in Steve's grasp. “Barnes. I'm commissioning you to build a custom bike for Steve. Money no object. I want to see what you can do. Will you?”

“Sure,” says James, arms still folded. “But I want to do that anyway. His current bike is no good.”

“Great,” Tony says, the challenge clear in his voice. “You can tell a *lot* about a person by how they build things.”

Steve finally manages to push Tony out the door, though not before Stark grabs a couple more of Darcy's cookies. On the way out, Tony whispers to Steve, “Don't even think of driving it before I check it over completely.”

“Tony. I know you mean well, but...” Steve sighs, once they're on the street. “Please let me have something of my own.”

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter title song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14GV12UO82A>

NOTE: apparently we're not supposed to be posting SBB2016 fics yet, until thestuckylibrary gets a Stucky Big Bang 2016 collection together. So, um, *derp\**, and this will be the last chapter posted until that happens. Keep your eyes on [thestuckylibrary](#) for their announcement! Or, y'know, subscribe to this on AO3. But thestuckylibrary is amazing so you should follow them anyhow because then you can waste EVEN MORE OF YOUR LIFE reading fanfic yes I know who needs sleep, or classes, or a job. Also their gif/img game is A++ 100%.

(But chapters 4 and 5 are gonna be totally worth the wait because oh my god, shit goes down.)

(also I'm travelling this weekend so even if the collection happens it may be a week before I get the next chapter up)

(unless I'm tragic and put it on a google doc so I can work on it on my phone)

*\*gang I am so terrible at reading/following directions it's not even true.*

In today's instalment of white-trash vehicle porn, I present to you the classic (1970s) F150 pickup in red and white:



We return to our usually-scheduled motorcycles next update.

# Cruel Summer

Chapter by [WeAreWolves](#)

## Chapter Summary

Of cupcakes and catastrophe.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next few days – indifferent; rainy – are filled with debriefs and publicity appearances. When Steve needs to go to Manhattan, he braves the subway or catches a ride with Clint. The thunderstorms washing across the five boroughs don't seem to quit and if he's honest with himself Steve doesn't miss his bike much in this weather.

His first day off is a Friday, and New York breaks into a heat wave. It's made worse by the residual humidity in the air; the dirty puddles of rainwater resting in every concave surface. Steve sleeps in, and only gets up when it's too hot to sleep any longer. He flips the aircon on. Its quiet hum deadens the softer street sounds, making his apartment seem even more isolated from the world outside.

He checks his phone. There's a text from Natasha, asking if he wants to meet up for brunch, but he texts back to decline. The past week's activities, he realises, have resulted in him getting behind on basic human things like grocery shopping and laundry and dry cleaning. Hey, he might even sketch.

Oh, who is he kidding.

Steve pours himself a big glass of orange juice and sits down in the armchair in his living room, the one by the window, with the good light. It looks out into the top half of an oak tree, dutifully pollarded every winter, and now once again a thicket of green leaves. He can stare at the light and the breeze going through the leaves for hours. Not that there was a breeze today. No. Just hot, sticky New York August, when everything smells like tarry asphalt and garbage and spilled ice cream.

He thinks back to the drive back from New Jersey in James' pickup truck. To James' hands on his face; to James' lips, almost meeting his. And Steve shifts in the chair, spreading his knees. As with every time his thoughts turn to James when alone, his cock twitches and begins to thicken. Steve has come nearly every night since the Jersey trip with James' name on his lips, arching and gasping in bed before dropping into a surprisingly peaceful and dreamless sleep.

Now, he puts the orange juice glass down on the floor next to his chair, and reaches a hand down between his legs. Part of him feels ridiculous, reacting so much to someone he's only met three times. But every time they talk, James says something that makes Steve feel like he understands him in a way that he's never really had. The devastating thing is that he knows James isn't saying these things to impress Steve or get in his good graces. He just... says them, because that's what he thinks. And that makes him want to know James so much more.

And also shove him against a wall and grind up against him until they both come in their pants like teenagers. And kiss him, hot and messy and long.

Steve is rubbing himself through the fabric of his pyjama bottoms, but it's not enough, not with the thoughts running through his head. He unties his fly and brings his cock out, feeling warm and honey-lazy in the midmorning sun, and so, *so* turned on.

He relaxes into the feeling, tilting his head back and shutting his eyes as he begins to stroke himself firmly. As he twists his fist over the head of his cock, running his thumb over its slit, he thinks about muscular thighs like corded steel wrapped around him. He thinks about a strong, hard body under him that he can't accidentally break. He thinks about thick, inked arms reaching down his pants, caressing him. He thinks about James tonguing him, rimming him, preparing him to take his cock.

Steve traces his fingernails over his own nipples, already hard under his t-shirt, and gasps at the spikes of pleasure as he fists his cock harder and faster.

He thinks about James pushing into him, fucking him against the workbench in the shop, looking at him with those pale eyes as he slowly, so slowly, pushes his cock into him--

Steve comes, hot, sudden, with a shout, an inarticulate cry of lust and release.

He pants, sweat beading on his forehead, hand slowing to a halt. Fuck, that was... unexpected. He sits in the armchair for a minute or two, just coming back to himself, enjoying the afterglow and feeling ridiculously irresponsible and free at 11am on a Friday morning. He smiles to himself. He's acting like a damn teenager, and he doesn't care. He pulls off his t-shirt and wipes himself off, then balls the shirt up and flings it in the vague direction of the laundry machine.

It's a complete Darcy throw that doesn't end up anywhere near the machine, and the thought of that makes him laugh.

Steve lies there, boneless, in the sunshine, spacing out at the patters of emerald made by the light through the oak leaves out the window.

And in the usual blossoming of post-orgasmic clarity, realises a few things.

First, he needs to ask James out. James isn't likely to initiate anything because of the whole Captain America issue; he's both shy and proud which, Steve knows from experience, is an excellent combination for regularly shooting yourself in the foot with human interactions.

Second, there's a whole Captain America issue. That if James says yes to going out with him, it will turn James' life upside down almost immediately. Not only would he be dating Captain America, which would involve a ton of media scrutiny in itself, he's a *man*, and a lot of people are going to have strong feelings about that. He'll have to get used to everything from random strangers sticking cellphones in his face to professional paparazzi chasing him. (Steve snorts. He'd like to see how well *that* would work, if James is on a bike.) But if he is, as Steve suspects, ex-special ops, camera-toting strangers running up to him could be extremely problematic.

Also, if (as Darcy suggested) James is private about his sexuality, how would he cope with the hate he will get from right-wing groups and general idiots if he and Steve do go out? How would he react if someone calls him a faggot, or sprays a slur onto the shop windows? Steve senses that underneath James' calm and measured exterior is a smouldering, almost savage passion... much as he wants to be the match that lights that into fire, much as he wants to burn up in its heat, he's also noticed the times when James shifts into something... dangerous. James would put someone in

hospital if he caught them defacing the shop. (Steve suspects he'd be right behind James. They might be a bad combination.)

The more Steve thinks about it, the more he wonders why anyone would want to go out with him. There's always the guy with the shield, the unspoken third member of the relationship, casting his shadow over everything. Steve Rogers, the guy America owns.

How on earth did Natasha manage to line up so many dates for him? Did she have a talk with each girl before arranging the date to let them know what they would be in for, or did she just assume they could think for themselves and send them in cold? Maybe he should have had brunch with her.

Steve thinks about all the tasks he's lined up in his plan for the day and decides that instead of doing any of them, he'll walk down to the water and get an ice-cream cone. After a shower. And after he stares at the leaves out the window for a little longer.

\* \* \*

A couple hours later, Brooklyn is still hot and muggy and listless, but Steve has managed to leave the apartment. He even smiles at the SHIELD operative, Sharon, tasked with living in the next-door apartment, as they pass in the front lobby near the mailboxes.

And if he figures that on the way to get his ice cream, he could detour a couple blocks to Red Star to see how his bike was getting on, well, who's to blame him?

The shop doesn't have air conditioning. Darcy looks miserable, wilted against the counter in a tank top, with a large fan pointed directly at her. Even Pingu is sprawled in a ridiculous frog-dog position on the cement floor, back legs splayed out behind her, looking like a dollop of melted chocolate.

Steve gives Darcy a cheery hello and asks about his bike. Darcy just groans and points towards the back, before sinking into inarticulate heat-based exhaustion once again.

He steps over Pingu and wanders into James' workshop.

James is bent over what must be the bones of a new bike, at present little more than a frame and a few engine parts, tinkering with it, his back to the door.

He is not wearing a shirt.

Steve had all sorts of plans taking shape in his head, ways to ask James out, witty things to say, but James is not wearing a shirt, and a light sheen of sweat glistens on his back. Cut-off cargos ride low on his hips, and there is no evident sign of underwear. Of course, if there is a day not to wear underwear, Brooklyn in 95-degree humidity is that day.

He's standing awkwardly, weight mostly on one leg with the other stretched out for balance as he leans over the bike chassis. The cutoffs frame his thick thigh muscles and then there is an uninterrupted, sculptural line of very long naked leg to admire, shapely and powerful.

“Um, hey,” Steve manages to choke out. He is seized with the urge to stride forwards and frame his hands around the bottom of James' rib cage; run his tongue along the muscles of his back, chasing drops of sweat and biting marks into the heated skin. Kissing every point of his spine. Grinding against his ass.

Steve rubs his temples with the thumb and middle fingers of one hand, as he collapses against the cool brick wall. He is a goddamn superhero. He's around hot, built guys *all the time*, and he's fine. What in hell is his problem? What is it about James that takes him to pieces every time he so much as thinks about him?

(Though, shirtless isn't fair. There should be some sort of Queensberry Rules about crushes and one of them involves no unexpected sweaty shirtlessness, especially when they have a body like James does.)

James fumbles the small wrench he is holding and it clatters to the ground. He blushes, and does the little shy wave he does.

And then it hits Steve. James has absolutely *no idea* how hot he is.

And that makes everything so much worse.

“You finished it already?” Steve asks thickly, nodding towards where his bike is sitting, looking as good as new.

“No. Almost. Waiting on one more part,” James says, apologetically, picking up his discarded t-shirt and wiping his face with it.

Darcy drapes herself operatically in the doorway, *La Traviata* for the heatstroke set. “I just checked on it; it's on the truck. UPS guy usually delivers around now. Both of you, go get an iced coffee. It'll probably be here when you get back.”

Steve smiles. “Iced coffee sounds great.”

“Yeah, it does,” says James. He looks down at the sweat-stained mess of the t-shirt in his hands, and bites his lip. “One minute,” he says, walking quickly towards the door to the upstairs. Pingu gets up from the floor with much groaning, and trundles after him, and as he disappears up the stairs with the dog behind him, Steve can hear him mutter, “I'm only going to come right back down again, silly dog.”

Darcy leans against the wall next to Steve. “One, I want a frappucino the size of my head. Two, make sure James eats something. He has to eat every two hours or he gets cranky, and it is too damn hot today to deal with his cranky Russian face.”

“You going to give me money for the frappucino?” Steve asks, quirking an eyebrow.

“Nope,” she says, folding her arms, then unfolding them with a grimace as she realises it's too hot for any part of her to touch any other part. “You owe it to me as tribute, since I am the only person in this building who has *any* game.”

Steve blinks owlishly at her.

Darcy narrows her eyes at him. “Also, while I have your attention, if you mess with him or break his heart I will *end* you. Don't think I won't. He's a good person. A *really* good person. Do not fuck him up.”



Steve feels the heat of the blush rising in his cheeks and stutters, gasping for a reply.

“He hired me when he found me sleeping in his alley last March,” Darcy says, because she has to say something, Captain America is making a face at her like a beached salmon and she can't take it.

“I was doing okay at the whole homelessness thing, y'know?,” she continues. “I knew all the shelters and their costs and curfew times, and my membership was still good at my gym out West and they had a branch here so I had showers most days, and all the libraries have computers and printers so I could apply for jobs. Being poor... there's like a whole skill set that goes with it, y'know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve says.

“But then this job interview goes really late, just, like, the boss doesn't show up and then makes us all wait, and I miss all the shelter curfews except for the really sketch one. And I could get a note from the job interview to show the shelter, but then I'd have to tell them I was homeless. So I figure nobody's gonna mess with the alley next to the bike shop run by the scary Russian dude, his truck is blocking it most of the time anyway. I curl up in the back of his bike trailer for the night and it's really fucking cold and I can't sleep. I know I'm going to be out of there at dawn so whatever, even if I don't sleep it's okay as long as no-one messes with me.”

“Then, like, I hear the side door of the shop open, but the lights aren't on. And I hear this voice with this heavy accent say *Girl, girl*, and I think fuck, at best I'm getting kicked out. At worst I'm gonna end up face down in the Gowanus Canal. Then he says, *it's too cold to sleep outside. Sleep inside, on the sofa. Don't steal anything*. And I can't think of anything to say, so I blurt out *I'm not a druggie*, and he says *I know*. Then he turns the shop lights on, leaves the alley door open, and just goes upstairs again.”

“So you went in?” Steve asks.

“Yeah, and this is how tragic I am. When James turns the lights on, I can see him for the first time as he's walking away and I was like, oh well, at least if I'm gonna be murdered it's by someone *smoking* hot. And that's when I decided I'd go sleep on the sofa.”

Darcy plucks at the hem of her tank top. Her green nail polish has mostly flaked off by now, but there are still little jagged ovals of it in the middle of her nails. “My life choices sometimes aren't the best. Like, I basically *got* in this situation because I dropped out of college and shelved this great internship to surprise-follow my boyfriend when he moved to New York, 'cause I thought he was the one, and we'd get married and live happily ever after in Manhattan just like in a Woody Allen movie if it involved more prozac. I show up to find out he's moved here to shack up with this other girl and rather than break up with me he'd just... not tell me. And he slammed the door in my face and I had no money to go back West and also I wanted to curl up and die. I had told all my friends it was this great epic love story.”

Steve can't think of anything to say, so he reaches out and squeezes Darcy's shoulder.

Darcy presses her lips together, trying to keep emotions inside. “And so fast-forwards a few weeks and I wake up on the sofa and James is making his gross brimstone tea. He asks if I can use MS Office and I'm like *duh* and he gives me a job doing his invoicing and says I can sleep on the sofa until I can afford my own place. Said he was on the streets for two years in Moscow.”

Darcy smiles a bit more. “He has this super cool black leather jacket from then, with all this white stuff painted on it in Cyrillic which he *freaks out* if you touch and which I think he's hidden because I *miight* have stolen it once and worn it to a bar. But oh my god, can we just have a

moment about James being a total street-racing punk sixteen-year-old hellraiser in Moscow and pray to the gods of Facebook that a photo of this exists somewhere?"

Steve laughs. "One of the things I'm most grateful for? No photographic evidence of my teenage years."

Darcy nudges him. "That's the only reason anyone thinks you're all virtuous and shit. No photos of you drunk off your ass at 17, mooning old ladies and howling at the stars."

James comes down while Steve is still chuckling at Darcy. He looks like he's stuck his top half under a cold shower – his hair is wet and curling down his neck; there is water splatter on his cargos, and he's wearing a clean tee: a navy-blue v-neck that is so old and worn it has small holes scattered across it like constellations (*help me Jesus*, Steve thinks). It stretches across his broad shoulders and chest, then hangs looser where his waist nips in. Not that Steve is staring, or anything. Pingu trundles down behind, out of breath from the journey and listlessly wagging her tail.

"Okay, I'm not so disgusting now," says James, pulling his wet hair back and twisting it into an elastic.

Steve bumps his shoulder and says, "You were hardly disgusting before."

James blushes and ducks his head, pushing a stray lock of hair behind his ear. "I don't do well in heat. Grew up very far north."

"Then let's walk over to the water. It'll be cooler there," Steve suggests.

"Ugh, it's Brooklyn in August," James groans. "*Nothing* is cool."

They end up going to a local coffee shop a block from the East River. Steve declares that he's buying; James of course complains but eventually Steve wins because Steve Rogers never backs down from a good fight. They get iced lattes; James gets a slice of cherry pie and Steve grabs a huge red velvet cupcake piled high with white buttercream frosting for himself. All the tables inside are full of people tapping away on computers; there are no two seats free together so they take their drinks and pastries outside and sit at a table in the sun.

James picks up the slice of pie in his bare hand and bites it, and some of the cherry filling drips down the side of his mouth. As James catches the errant juices with his thumb and licks them off, Steve rearranges the way he is sitting and reflects briefly on the gross unfairness of his life.

"So," Steve chokes out, reaching for his drink. "How'd you get into bike racing? It looks really dangerous."

"Says the guy who throws a fancy trash can lid at aliens," James says, and Steve can't help it, he kicks him under the table for that one. James snorts, then grows more serious. "I spent a lot of my life scared," he says. "Racing was a way to channel that fear, to have specific, immediate fears, rather than big nebulous existential ones. Fears I can do something about."

Steve smiles, disbelieving. "I can't ever see you scared. You're almost as big as me. You walk like a fighter..."

James visibly closes up, leaning back and crossing his arms. He looks away. "I was sick a lot, during puberty."

"Me too," Steve says. "You came out of it OK, though. I needed a top secret government super-

soldier programme to fix the list of things wrong with me. I had asthma, scoliosis, hearing difficulties, colour blindness... a weak heart... what about you?"

"Lots of flu. Growing pains. Migraines. *Horrible* migraines. It was... I couldn't afford to see a doctor. And I was afraid to," James said. "Even though I know there was something really wrong with me." He snorts, and looks down at his forearms. "I thought I was a robot. An android. I used to scratch myself up, convinced if I dug deep enough I'd find the wires. That's why this," he says, raising his left arm.

"Why would you think you were a robot?" Steve asks.

James shrugs. "I was a fucked-up kid. Growing up in an orphanage can mess you right up."

"Life fucks us all up," Steve says. "Look at Tony. He had everything. Rich parents, who stayed together... he's *really* fucked up. He's probably my best friend, but he's messed up."

"I had a rich adoptive parents for about two years," James says, his nose wrinkling in disdain. "Pfft. Not worth it."

"What happened?" Steve asks. Two years was a pretty short time to ditch an adoptive kid.

James explains, around another mouthful of cherry pie. "They caught me with another guy. Gay isn't acceptable in that family. Very right-wing. And they made it not acceptable for me to stay in Russia. So here I am."

"Oh," Steve says. "You can't go back to Russia at all?" Steve thinks how ridiculous that is. Russia is *huge*.

But James just shakes his head no.

"Never knew your birth parents?" Steve continues.

James shakes his head again.

"I never knew my dad," Steve admits. "Lost my mom when I was seventeen. Never would have survived to seventeen in an orphanage, not the ones we had when I was a kid."

"I was found."

"What?" Steve says.

"When I was ten. In Arkhangelsk, where I'm from. I didn't speak. They took me to the state orphanage. Lived there until I was sixteen, until I aged out. Not a good place."

Steve puts down the cupcake he was about to bite into. "Jesus," he breathes.

James shrugs. "You should know. I'm not the easiest person."

"Well," Steve says, "If we're confessing things we think the other should know, then you've probably figured out by now that I'm bi."

"You didn't punch me when I almost kissed you, so," James says, picking a cherry out of his pie and pressing it into his mouth, smirking.

Steve smiles and takes a bite of his cupcake. And reaches over and traces his fingers over James' palm, on the table. "Look, I'm not the easiest either. Everything I do is... public, even when I don't

want it to be. It's a lot for anyone to cope with. But... saying that, I'm really interested in you. Would you go out on a date with me?"

And for the first time, James smiles that blinding, huge smile at him. It's like being hit by a spotlight. Steve's insides twist and shimmer and he feels made of stars. Then James shakes his head and starts laughing.

"What?" Steve says, cold tendrils of fear coiling through his chest. He's not going to say no... is he? Oh God. Has he made some sort of terrible misjudgment of the situation?

"You have frosting on your nose," James says.

Steve blushes and feels laughter bubbling up through him and finally gives in to it, shoulders shaking.

James reaches forwards. "C'mere, Casanova," he murmurs, and stretches out his index finger, wiping off the offending blob of icing. Then he leans back and sticks his finger in his mouth, sucking the icing off.

"Yes," James says, after he pulls his finger out of his mouth with, Steve thinks, a little more lasciviousness than is strictly necessary.

"Yes?" Steve breathes.

James smiles again and kicks him under the table.

They're so wrapped up in each other, they never hear the camera.

\* \* \*

Red Star's front office is full of customers when they return. Steve can't help feeling annoyed; he wanted more time with James alone. Maybe even a kiss goodbye. Besides, the shop is an incredibly peaceful place and he resents having to share it with others.

They both duck in the back and James indicates for Steve to wait while he deals with the people in the front office. Steve can't see them, but he can hear easily enough through the wall as he lounges on the sofa and tries to keep 60lbs of overheated pit bull from drooling all over his lap.

There's a nervous-sounding guy with a scooter who got sideswiped by a delivery van; he's shaken up and on the border of tears. James soothes him and talks him through being in shock, and then makes a time for him to come back and pick up the scooter when he has a spare hour to learn some defensive driving techniques. Darcy even gives the guy a hug on the way out, saying it's shop policy that you get a free hug with your first bike crash.

Next are a couple street racer kids with a Suzuki bike in for a tune-up. They whisper to each other while James helps the guy with the scooter, like he's some sort of idol of theirs. When James gets to them, they launch into an animated discussion about the merits of a 'Busa versus a Gixxer, clearly trying to impress him, and Steve can almost feel James' amusement through the wall. They ask him if he's going to street-race again and he says, "Maybe." The kids leave in a raucous clattering of high-fives and tinny rap music played out of their phone speakers.

Finally, a local artist's beloved secondhand Ducati is acting up. Steve only knows the guy is an artist because halfway through James looking at his bike and working up an estimate, he clears his throat nervously and says, "Um, I have something kind of weird to ask?"

James, being James, just grunts noncommittally and continues fiddling with the bike.

"Um, I'm a comic book artist? And I teach a drawing class for young artists that meets over in Gowanus. We, uh... they're mostly interested in drawing superheroes but some of them have problems with getting the anatomy and musculature right. And, uh, would you pose for the class? Because, uh..."

Steve grips the arm of the sofa so hard he feels the wood frame start to crack under his hand.

James clearly gives the guy A Look, because the guy backtracks immediately. "Like, in a pair of shorts or something. It would just be for a couple hours, on a Sunday."

James mulls it over. "You going to give me free comic books?" he says, and Steve can hear the smile in his voice.

Steve is shaking with furious jealousy. He wants to stride out and ball his fists over the interloper and tell him *Mine he's mine stay away. I get to draw him first*. Instead he stalks over to the pile of scrap and discard metal James has in a corner and picks up a heavy, dented piece of exhaust pipe and bends it until it snaps.

His eyes are scanning the pile for something else he can break when he hears James say, "Let me think about it. I'll tell you when you come to pick up your bike." The guy thanks him profusely and leaves. *Finally*. Steve glares out the shop window into the alley to see if he can get a look at the guy, but he walks off in the other direction.

James comes back a few minutes later with the last part for Steve's bike. He arches an eyebrow at the scrap metal pile but doesn't say anything. Just walks over to the Harley and starts putting together the now-complete rear drum brake assembly.

Steve feels out of sorts, embarrassed. He knows James heard him, maybe even all the way out front, because James was sensitive like that. What's the protocol for jealous tantrums? Does he apologise? Does he pretend it never happened? What do you do after you make everything awkward?

The Harley is finished about ten minutes later. James rolls it off the work stand and then presses the keys into Steve's hand.

They both freeze there, hands touching, staring at each other. Steve's heart feels like it's going to come unmoored, tear out of his chest, it's beating so fast. *Mine he's mine*.

Finally James breaks the connection, lifting his hand away. But then he brings it up slowly to Steve's face, running his fingers ever so gently, feather-light, down Steve's cheek, and then ghosts his thumb over Steve's lower lip. Steve's eyes flutter shut and he can't help, can't stop the low moan that escapes him.

"About that date," James murmurs. "Don't forget."

Then James walks out front and Steve is left there with his bike and a snoring pit bull and a hard-on and a feeling like part of him is missing now that James has gone.

\* \* \*

James walks out front and leans on the counter next to Darcy. She thinks he looks a little stressed, breathing heavily. "Can you watch the shop for fifteen minutes?" he asks. "I need to, uh, go upstairs--"

"--and have a little moment about how in the very near future you're probably going to be tapping that perfect blond ass? Go, James. Have that moment." Darcy holds up a hand and James' face breaks into a grin. He high-fives her.

Darcy shoves the red star on his shoulder, affectionately. "Seriously you two are like the hottest guys in the world. You *have* to bang. And also you have to video it for me. PROMISE ME."

James groans. "Darcy, no."

"Darcy YES," Darcy grins.

He smacks her gently up the back of the head and walks off, muttering, "I'm gonna..."

"Yeah, you go do that," Darcy snorts.

\* \* \*

He manages to get upstairs before he loses it. In the quiet of his minimalist apartment above the shop, James leans with his back against the door as his heart beats double-time and whispers to himself in Russian, "You are allowed to have things. You are allowed to have things."

Because, Jesus Christ, he *wants* to have Steve Rogers. Wants to bite bruises into that perfect peach of an ass. Wants to make those green-blue eyes blow black with lust. Wants to turn him into shuddering jelly that can't even remember his own name. Wants to see how many times he can make him come.

There's just--

But if he--

James smacks his head back against a wall. *You are allowed to have things.*

He looks down at himself, at his shorts tenting over his half-erection, and starts pulling his clothes off, throwing them on the floor as he stalks to the shower. He turns the setting on to its hardest pressure.

By the time the lukewarm water washes off the sweat and stress of the day, James is fully hard, leaning against the wall of the shower, thinking of blond hair and absurd shoulders and plush lips that are so, so sensitive. He wraps his left hand around his cock, stroking hard, and he takes his right hand and drags his nails up his perineum and over his balls. As the water from the hard shower hits him like needles, he arches, hissing the pleasure between his teeth, picturing holding Steve down, the surprise in his eyes.

Or, *fuck*, those thick lips stretched over his cock, what it would be like to look down at Steve,

cheeks hollow, as he deep-throated James. No, not that. Not immediately. He wants to tease Steve for hours, take him to the edge over and over again and then back off until he begs for release, and then finally let him go, and see if, as he suspects, Steve is a screamer.

As James shudders into orgasm himself, hot come jetting over his fist and down to be washed away by the shower, he feels the clench of terror in his stomach, because this is so, so much more than just lust over a pretty body. This one, he's all in. Heart, body and soul, in frighteningly deep, and if it goes down in flames he may never get up again.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Natasha is at Steve's door when he opens it to leave for his morning run. "Hey," she says, holding up her tablet. On TMZ there are three photos of Steve and James from their coffee date, and a big headline: *It's Bi, Bi, Baby: Captain America Hits The Town With Mystery Boyfriend!*

Steve's heart sinks. One coffee. One goddamn coffee. The world can't let him have *one goddamn coffee* in peace. He wants to punch something. He wants to storm over to Red Star, to apologise, to swear to James that he'll find a way to protect him from the Captain America circus, that he'll keep him apart from all that.

Natasha pushes past him into his kitchen, her voice light. "So, there's this cute guy in marketing who always checks you out at the Tower when we spar--"

Steve holds up a hand. "Natasha, no. Please stop. I can handle my own love life."

Natasha spins on a heel and positively hisses at him. "No you can't, Rogers. You really fucking can't."

"What the hell, Natasha," Steve growls.

She pulls a thick file out of her bag and slaps it onto his kitchen table. "Your cute mechanic? Doesn't exist."

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter title song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ePIZugahFc>

ok so I lied I was just going to tidy up this chapter and instead I finished it. And I checked TSL's SBBB rules and the collection won't be up until end June / early July. So, ugh, don't wanna wait that long. Away this weekend so no chapter likely for a week after this, sorry.

Also in a rush so there won't be the essay about tea that I wanted to write in the notes other than to say that smoky teas are the best. You should try out Lapsang Souchong and Pu Erh, both Chinese teas, if you like smoky/tarry things. They're super if you're

trying to wean yourself off coffee and move to tea instead. A good Formosa Oolong is a joy, too, and less smoky. They are drunk without sugar or milk. If you like black teas, Lychee tea is really delightful, it's mainly a Szechuan tea. Again, no sugar or milk. It is REALLY hard to find good Russian tea in the US (a 50/50 Lapsang and Oolong mix will give you an approximate idea) but if any of you have sources tellllll meeeeeeee. Mostly I get my tea from [www.harney.com](http://www.harney.com) . Ooh, they appear to have a Russian Country tea. Gonna have to try that. GET LOOSE TEA, YOU HEATHENS. Teabags in mugs of tepid water stuck in the microwave is not how you make tea. Ever. It is how you make a cup of lukewarm misery.

Whoops. Apparently I did go on a rant about tea.

Motorcycle porn: a Suzuki Hayabusa modded for drift racing



and a Suzuki GXSR1000 dropped and stretched for street racing:





# The First Cut Is The Deepest

Chapter by [WeAreWolves](#)

## Chapter Summary

Things fall apart. Friends do their best to help.

(TW: self-harm)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“There is no such person as James Barnes,” Natasha says, folding her arms and glaring at Steve.

Steve looks down at the file Natasha had thrown on his kitchen table. He frowns, then slides it back towards her. “With respect, Natasha--”

“Dammit, Steve!” Natasha all but shouts. “I’ve been on the phone all night with some very unsavory people in Russia that I never wanted to talk to again. And who I certainly don’t want to owe favours. Sit down and listen.”

Steve steps away and leans on the counter, his back to her. He doesn’t want her to see the tears starting to prick at the sides of his eyes. “Natasha,” he whispers. “Whatever you found... please don’t take this from me. Not yet.”

Natasha’s exhaustion and nerves bleed out of her as she takes a good look at her friend, at how his giant shoulders are sagging miserably, how he won’t meet her gaze. She sighs and pulls out a kitchen chair, wincing as it screeches against the wood floor. “Shit,” she says softly as she sits down. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you.” It isn’t a question.

“You think I’m being childish,” Steve says. Also not a question. At least he half-turns to look at her.

She reaches her hand out, across the table towards him, and Steve notices the circles under her eyes, the tense line near her lips. How she’s in a simple t-shirt and leggings, hair pulled back. How her worry for him is clear in her tired, un-made-up face. Slowly, reluctantly, like a man going to his own execution, he sits down opposite her and takes her hand.

Her small fingers curl around his and she squeezes gently. “I don’t think you’re childish. I think you’re the best person I know. And... sometimes you’re so eager to see the best in people, you’re blind to the bad in them. I know you are, because of how you treat me.” She smiles now, and her green eyes regain a spark of their usual mischief. “And please, in what world did you ever think you could date a Russian and *not* expect me to pull everything on him up to and including his kindergarten report cards?”

“I know.” Steve gives her hand two gentle squeezes. With his free hand he rubs the bridge of his nose. “How bad?” he says, at last.

“Did he tell you his name?” Natasha asks. “Not what he uses here. His Russian name?”

“No. He said it was hard to pronounce--” Steve has an awful realisation: in some ways, he knows almost nothing about the man whose body and face have been filling his idle thoughts for the past few weeks. But then... he feels he knows so much about James Barnes: his favorite Bond film, how he takes his tea, his messy truck, his smile, *God, his smile...* the way he idly turns things over in his long fingers when he's distracted or nervous... that he's the sort of person who adopts stray dogs and stray girls and will stay with a stranger and talk them through post-traumatic shock.

He certainly knows more about James than James does about him, although he supposes that James doesn't have to ask about his past because it's out there for anyone to see, in news articles and histories and gossip columns by the yard. Although it isn't really his past, it's people's opinions about his past. “I got the feeling he wanted to put his past behind him,” Steve finishes.

“Mm-hmm,” Natasha hums as she opens the thick file. “So we'll start with James Barnes.”

She fishes a photo out of the file as she talks. “Everything about him is fake. Every piece of ID he has is a forgery. Very good forgery, but still. And the name?” Natasha pushes the photo towards Steve. “Plucked off a grave in Green-Wood Cemetery. An archangel for the boy from Arkhangelsk.”

Steve takes the photo, his hand trembling. It's of a child's grave, an angel holding a sword over a worn engraving, *James Buchanan Barnes, 1917-1927*, and Steve has his second awful realisation of the morning.

“I knew that kid. That's Bucky's grave...” Steve swallows. “He went to my school. Lived down the street. When I was 10, I was being beaten up by these two older kids. Bucky was on the other side of the road and saw it happening. He yelled at them to stop and ran into the street. Didn't look... Got, got hit by a delivery truck. Died instantly.” He rubs his eyes. “God, I'm such an idiot, why didn't I remember that was Bucky's name?”

“It gets better,” Natasha says, with a face that means *actually, it gets exponentially worse*.

And it did.

Natasha pulls up one of the blurry photos of James from the TMZ website. Something passes over her face, a flicker of fear or revulsion, Steve isn't sure which. What he is sure, is that it's not an emotion he thinks he's ever seen Natasha show before. Perhaps it's deliberate, part of an attempt to influence his reactions, but he somehow doesn't believe that. Natasha doesn't game him, not usually.

“I wouldn't have done this, not yet, if I hadn't seen *this*.” She taps the photo, where it shows the tattoo on James' right shoulder: the cat with the rifle and dagger.

Then she presses her lips together. “I knew exactly who he was, then. You're dating Winter. You're dating the only man who ever shot me and lived.” She lifts up her t-shirt and quirks an eyebrow.

Steve looks down to see a nasty, oval scar on her right abdomen: the entry wound of a rifle bullet. “Jesus, Natasha, I'm sorry--”

Natasha waves him off. “I admit I have a lot of unresolved feelings about that mission.” She tilts her head and gets a faraway look in her eyes. “I'd only recently joined SHIELD. There was a scientist they wanted to get out of Russia. He'd been involved with some very shady genetic engineering stuff under the Soviets. He wanted to defect. Bring over a lot of information. I was to

escort him out. I thought... I thought he might have information about the Red Room. About *me*.”

“So James was Russian special ops, sent to stop you?” Steve asks. He's not surprised in the least.

Natasha nods. “Something called Zaslon. They're the black ops division of the SVR. I knew they were good, and I knew they were on our tail. What I didn't expect was to have my tyres shot out near Odessa from two miles away, and then for the sniper to take a kill shot *through me* to the scientist when I tried to shield him with my body.”

“That's... impressive,” Steve says, carefully.

“It's not impressive, Steve, it's *impossible*. I don't think Barton could have made that shot. Anyway. I pass out briefly due to pain and blood loss, and when I wake up, the dead scientist's left hand is cut off because the SVR ask for proof of kill.” Natasha elects not to mention how when she woke up, *her* hand was on a field dressing pressed to her gunshot wound, and how there was another field dressing left within reach. She knows Steve would latch onto those facts to the exclusion of all else, and she can't have that. Not with what she has to reveal. “You could say after that, I was motivated to do some research on Zaslon when I got back to SHIELD.”

“And it was James.”

“Or to use his real name, Mikhail – *Mischa* – Pechorin. Orphanage kid. No father, so no patronymic. They called him Winter: a bastard from the North. Zaslon's best sniper. He and his unit have walked into, and back out of, some of the nastiest situations in recent history. Latveria. Tajikistan. South Sudan. Ukraine. Chechnya. That mess in Aleppo. All six of them have those black cat tattoos.” Natasha looks at Steve fondly. “Of course, his ruining my bikini body isn't really the issue. We're all professionals. These things happen.”

She pages through the information in the folder again. “It's what he and his unit did after they left the SVR that I have a problem with.” This time, the photo she hands Steve is a low-resolution surveillance photo. James/Misha is walking out of a fancy stone building in, presumably, a Russian city, towards a black Mercedes. His hair is short, almost shaved. With him is an older man, maybe 60, of medium height and with a beard much like Tony's. The man's face has a fierce sort of intelligence to it, a hawk's face, and there is cruelty in the eyes. James is scanning the street, a hand hovering near what must be a holstered gun. They're both wearing suits. Behind and around them are a few more, younger men, presumably James' unit.

Natasha taps the image of the older man. “Know who that is?”

Steve has seen that face before, but... where? His memory is nearly faultless thanks to the serum, but he's not able to picture where he's seen the old man's face before. He shuts his eyes, then it comes to him: a SHIELD briefing report on organized crime. The man is one of the most powerful gangsters in the world. His name is... Steve can picture it, in Helvetica semibold italic, under the photo. Aleksander--

“Aleksander Lukin. Runs the entire Moscow underworld.” Natasha sighs, and looks at Steve, the apology for what she is about to say clear in her face. “He runs it because Misha – *James* – handed it to him.” She puts a hand on Steve's forearm. “Your guy is *bratva*, Steve. Russian mafia. Not only that, he's one of the most feared hitmen in *bratva* history.”

Steve puts his head down on the table. He wants to give up on everything.

Natasha continues. “Credited with two dozen high-profile kills in the past 5 years alone. No idea how many more they didn't bother to write down. After four years in the SVR, he and his unit

walked out together, straight into the arms of Lukin's mob. My contacts think he was connected since he was a teenager, street-racing in Moscow. In any case, within two years Misha had killed everyone that stood in Lukin's way to having all of Moscow under the control of one gang for the first time in memory. *Everyone*. In appreciation, Lukin adopted him.”

Natasha pushes out another photo. It's James, or Misha, or whatever his name is, standing with his shirt off, smoking with some other guys. They're laughing. They're near a beach; it's sunny. Steve feels the familiar spark of desire in his insides at seeing the hard V-shape of James' muscular upper body; his smile; the way his pale eyes crinkle when he laughs. And he begins to hate himself for feeling that way.

He starts picking at details, so he can stop thinking about what that body would feel like under his hands. He can see part of the cat tattoo on James' right arm. Then he notices how different his tattoos are on the left arm. His later, full sleeve robot arm tattoo must be cover-up work. Here, the younger Misha's red star is more faceted, and the plates and wires around it are more like an epaulette. Other, small tattoos are scattered down his arm: a word here or there in Cyrillic; the strange serial number; a circle with a dot in it; a sword; and a five-sided mark with a star in it and “CCCP” above it.

“The *bratva* is like the yakuza. You wear your resume on your skin.” Natasha points to each tattoo in turn. “The star is the thieves' star, every little *bratva* boy gets that. The epaulette means he's very high-ranking within the gang. The knife is for a killer. This one, the dot in the circle, is the tattoo for an orphan, alone in the world. And this one,” she touches the five-sided symbol and smirks, “is the old Soviet quality mark. Another common one for gangster boys.”

Steve indicates the serial number: AMRL2EX01007. “This is his army number, then?”

Natasha shakes her head. “No. That's not the format of Russian military ID numbers. It's...” She thinks for a moment, tilting her head and tapping a finger against her lips. “It's a manufacturing number. What you would find on the underside of your gun barrel. Maybe he really liked his sniper rifle?” Then she looks at Steve. “How are you doing?”

Steve raises a hand weakly, and lets it fall back to the table. His answer is listless. “Just, just get it over with.”

Natasha nods. “So now we get to the part that had me on the phone all night. Lukin catches Misha having sex with a man and disowns him. I'm fairly sure it was a set-up. A year before, Lukin had married the widow of a rival, this woman named Daria. She has two sons, which Lukin adopted. They're known as the Two Princes. Daria is obviously concerned that Misha will succeed Lukin, as he's loved within the gang. So she out-manouevvers him. And so Misha fakes his own death in a street-race crash and starts a new life as James Barnes, fixing motorcycles in a backwater Brooklyn neighborhood. And yes, in case you're wondering, the *bratva* do make *The Godfather* look like *My Little Pony*.”

“What's *My Little Pony*?” Steve asks, as Natasha taps away at her tablet.

“Children's cartoon about friendship. Multicoloured anthropomorphised horses who sing. Don't put it on your list.” Natasha pulls up a dash-cam video of a street race at night, motorcycles whizzing towards a car in which a girl's voice can be heard, sometimes screaming and sometimes laughing.

Natasha's finger arrows down on one racer in a black leather jacket with white designs painted on it. “That's Misha.” The thing about the race is it's in the middle of a busy freeway along the Moscow river, and the racers are going against traffic. Not only that but they're actively trying to take each other out – one of them has a short length of pipe he's using to knock other riders down.

Everything happens so fast Steve can barely parse it – Misha / James is almost smashed between two cars but evades with superb reflexes, kicking off against one of the cars. Then another rider cuts in and rams the pipe into James' front wheel. Steve gasps as the bike flips, and the rider goes flying. Misha's head hits a stone guard-wall, and he tumbles into the Moscow river, sinking beneath its ice-laden surface.

“A severe head injury and then the Moscow River in December,” Natasha smirks. “And yet here he is. I guess you really can't kill Winter.”

Steve spreads his hands. “That's, that's what I don't get, Natasha. He left. He changed. I can't reconcile the person I know, who is quiet and kind, with, with, with this killer. We *have* to believe that people put their pasts behind them. That they can reform. Otherwise what we do, as Avengers, is completely pointless. He's put this behind him, and I don't think we should judge him on that.”

The look that Steve gives Natasha damn near breaks her heart. Love is for children, and she can see the childlike hope in his eyes. He really wants to believe that Winter is the sort of person who just one day isn't a killer any more. “*You* changed, Natasha. Has James killed more people than you?”

Natasha groans in frustration. “The difference is, if the Red Room snapped their fingers I wouldn't go running back to them.”

She begins to lay out photo after photo, crime scene images of Winter's Russian mob assassinations. A condo splashed with blood in Monaco. A man with half his skull blown away in a Moscow restaurant. A slit throat in the changing room of a high-end London tailor. Bodies, so many bodies, blood on grimy bathroom tiles, on the teak decking of yachts, in back-alley gutters.

“You don't just *throw away* an asset like that.” Natasha says, continuing to lay out photos. “He *hasn't* changed. He isn't in exile, not really. He's *insurance*. One day Lukin will snap his fingers and Misha will strap on his guns and go running home to daddy, no questions asked. And given that one of the little princes makes Nicu Ceaușescu look like Henry Kissinger, and the other is just stupid, this could happen at any time. Lukin wants to maintain his empire. All he has to do is hint that Daria is going after Misha's brothers, his old unit, and *voilà*, instantly Misha is back from the dead and in Moscow. And nobody will bat an eyelid because they know you can't kill Winter.”

Steve idly watches as water drips from his eyes onto the wooden surface of the kitchen table, a surface Natasha has nearly covered with grisly photographs of assassinations committed by the man he dreams of kissing. And a little part of him knows that it's the same person, that James is capable of this. Hell, James' ruthlessness on the race track was one of the things he found most attractive about him. His mind flits back to the way James was utterly relaxed when threatening the banker at the bar: cold and confident and fearless.

Even so, he doesn't want to give up on James.

“It's not true, Natasha,” Steve whispers. “He's done. He won't go back to doing this.”

“But he did it,” Natasha says, laying out the last photo and folding her hands. “If you were anyone else, Steve, fine, I'd say go chase after this infatuation with your bad boy. But...” Her green eyes dart over to the shield, its garish colours bright against the bland, beige sofa it leans on.

“But Captain America can't.” Steve sighs. “The price I pay for...” Steve gestures wearily over his body, the new one, the one that doesn't fail or hurt or shut down. The one that gets him glances of admiration rather than pity.

“Do you ever regret...?” Natasha asks.

A whole logjam of thoughts and emotions rushes through Steve's head, so many feelings that he can barely sort through them. Finally he sighs and says, "No, of course not. But sometimes I wish I could be invisible again, like *he* was. Little Stevie Rogers that nobody saw. I wish this were like a coat, that I could take off sometimes."

"Quite a heavy coat," Natasha demurs.

Steve shrugs.

"Look," Natasha says. "This might be a bad idea, but... let me set you up one more time? It might take your mind off--" she gestures over the photographs. "--*this*."

"No--"

"--hear me out, Steve," she continues. "Maybe you're just a lot more into guys than you thought, and it took running into a really hot guy to realise that. I will admit that Winter is hot. Terrifying, but hot." She grins at the sad little smile Steve makes. "Listen. Pepper has this friend. He's an actor, and out, and is of the same general level of hotness as Winter. Maybe go out with him one night?" Then she winks. "Also, it's a sure thing, if you know what I mean."

"Natasha, I'm not the sort of person who rolls into bed with people I've just met," Steve says, lapsing into his Captain America Disapproves face.

Natasha's eyes positively sparkle in recognition of his look. "Well, Black Widow doesn't judge," she replies.

"Yes you do," Steve scoffs. "There are, there are ancient Greek spirits of vengeance that judge less than you do on a daily basis. You make the Eumenides feel inadequate."

"Only when someone looks like they might hurt my friends," Natasha says. She pats his arm as she gets up to leave. "I don't have many. Gotta take care of the few that put up with me."

Steve waits a good half hour, until he's sure Natasha is long gone from the neighborhood, before kicking his shield so hard it embeds in the opposite wall.

\* \* \*

The next week is misery. Steve sweeps all the files, all the photos of James' kills, on top of some placemats in a half-full kitchen drawer. He barely leaves the apartment, and when he has to go in to Avengers Tower, he takes roundabout routes to keep him as far away from Red Star as possible.

He knows he should go talk to James; should go hear his side of the story. But he wants to interrogate his own heart first.

Besides, right now the... whatever they have, it's not started, and it's not yet ended. If he goes to see James, then there is every chance when he walks out of Red Star it will be forever. He's not ready for that yet. So he paces in his bland apartment with his few things, his heart in a state of quantum superposition, knowing that practically this state is the same as everything being over. But there is still the tiniest sliver of hope, and what is hope but the dream of a place we will never visit, but feel

better for knowing exists?

He looks at all the photographs, over and over. There is no cruelty in the kills, no needless pain or signs of torture. They're all ruthlessly efficient. He wonders at the other men in the photo of James / Misha on the beach, the unswerving loyalty in their eyes. One of them is small, not much bigger than Steve was before the serum, all red hair and freckles and attitude. His cat tattoo is on his left abdomen, curling down towards the jeans that ride low on pointy, skinny hips. He's just told a joke; it's his comment that the other men are laughing at. Steve puts that photo face down, and picks up one of an older, tattooed man, face red and eyes terrified from strangulation.

Steve tells himself it's just a crush. A stupid infatuation based on pale blue eyes and a nice body. The flailings of a lonely man overreacting at the first sign of kindness by a handsome stranger in a new neighborhood.

By day three, he's almost convinced himself. He picks up the phone and calls Natasha.

The shield is still embedded in the living room drywall.

\* \* \*

The actor's name is Patrick and he's a couple inches shorter than Steve. He has a practiced, megawatt smile that never quite reaches his eyes, and designer jeans that would have been a year's rent in 1939. He smells like cologne and hair product. Steve hates himself for feeling a small pull of attraction towards him.

Still. Natasha is right. Maybe an evening out with Patrick will help.

It's not cheating; he and James aren't dating. They'd only talked about going on a date in the future.

(Then why is his heart such a truculent presence in his chest as he looks at Patrick?)

Patrick is funny. He tells witty, self-deprecating stories about disastrous film sets and the craziness of press tours, and his little touches bring Steve out of himself. They finish their drinks at the bar where they'd agreed to meet (to give Steve an out in case he decided he couldn't go through with dinner) and walk down Carroll Street, shoulders bumping. It's nice. It's not the all-consuming, down-the-rabbit-hole sense of falling he has with James, it's just... nice. Pleasant. Easy.

Patrick's in the middle of an amusing anecdote about an awards show when they pass the little bar that Darcy likes, the one where he had first danced with James. Steve ducks his head and instinctively turns his shoulder, in case Darcy is in the crowd milling out front.

"Everything okay?" Patrick says, stopping him with a gentle hand on his arm.

"Yeah," Steve sighs. "I... my, my, sorta-ex sometimes goes there," he says, blushing.

Patrick raises an eyebrow and steps around in front of him. He runs a hand down Steve's cheek. His touch is surer than James', a firm, confident motion as opposed to the way James had ghosted his fingers down to Steve's mouth. Steve convulses a little in want, and he's not sure if it's from a memory or from what is happening right now.



No, that's not true. He knows. But he's going to pretend it's what's happening now.

"I don't like this sorta-ex, because talking about him made you stop smiling," Patrick says, leaning in close. "And you have such a gorgeous smile."

And then they're kissing. And Steve shuts his eyes and thinks of pale blue orbs and long dark lashes and gorgeous smiles.

\* \* \*

James had worked late on the new bike. To be fair, he'd worked pretty nonstop for the past week, throwing himself into prepping his racing bike for Indianapolis and designing and building the new bike for Steve. It was more of an engineering and design challenge than he expected, but he could solve the problems as they came up. The challenge was nice, actually.

He hadn't wanted to turn on the news, because if the Avengers were away facing danger it meant he'd worry about Steve, and if the Avengers weren't doing anything... well, he didn't want to think about what that meant. Because in his heart he knew beautiful Steve Rogers was too good for him, that all his fever dreams about him, about how *right* they were for each other, were just delusions that would wash away like the blood on his hands never could. No matter how much he'd tried, in the freezing waters of the Moscow River.

He would tell Steve when they went on their date, before someone else told him. Just one kiss, he thought, and then he would tell him. Well. He'd tell him part of it. The rest could come later, if there was a later. (There wouldn't be a later, he thought. People like him don't get to have things.)

So he threw himself into his work.

Working was better than enduring Darcy's Searching Looks and jokes about Russian Pining Status. (He'd recently graduated from *Three Sisters* to *Eugene Onegin*, apparently, in terms of miserable-looking wistfulness levels.) She'd felt so bad when a couple of her jibes landed a little close to the bone that she'd decided to make it up to him via the medium of pie. Specifically, weird American pies like pumpkin (surprisingly good), peanut butter/chocolate (Just... peanut butter. What. America, no) and key lime (yes).

Working was better than thinking.

That's how James found himself alone in the shop late Friday night, bent over the new bike, fiddling with the bullet-proof cowling he'd painted the day before. There was always one more little thing he wanted to do before stopping, and before he knew it, it was almost 10pm and that's when the bodega closed.

He pulls on a hoodie and runs out the side door, cutting swiftly and silently down the empty streets of Red Hook to the place that would sell him all the fried chicken they had left at close for about \$10. He waves to the owner as he slips into the store, grins and nods when asked if he wanted the chicken, then grabs some apples, raw ginger and greens that he could throw into a smoothie because Darcy made faces at him if he didn't eat vegetables.

He had paused in the doorway to re-arrange his grocery bags when he hears a familiar laugh. He glances up.

Steve is down the street, in front of the bar Darcy liked.

He has his arm around the waist of another man, and looks happy.

The other man kisses him.

The other man is handsome, a slim brunet with an easy smile and quietly expensive clothes and hands that probably only knew how to strip clothes, not guns. One of those hands slides down over Steve's ass as they kiss, and Steve moves in to the touch.

James retreats into the store. "Bobby, you mind if I go out the back?" he mutters, unable to meet the cashier's gaze.

"Yeah, man, sure. You okay?" the Bangladeshi bodega owner looks at him with concern. James is a local, and a good customer.

James nods as he pushes out the rear door by the coolers. What was another small lie in a life of them, anyway.

When he gets upstairs to his loft above the shop, he dumps the food on his table. He wasn't hungry. He didn't think he would ever be hungry again.

Pingu wiggles a greeting and James flops onto his old, scratched-up leather sofa and lets the dog clamber up into his lap. He hugs her chunky body and buries his face in her black and white fur for long minutes as she snorts and tries to lick his ear.

Then he goes into the bathroom and shuts the door. He pulls out the old straight razor from the tin it lives in, and snorts at the rust on it. He sits on the edge of the bath and stretches out his right forearm, bracing it on the top of his knee. The razor is in his left hand.

This time, he'd find the wires.

\* \* \*

Steve breaks the kiss when Patrick's hand slides up from his ass to the waistband of his jeans, and starts to slip beneath. This was wrong, all wrong. Patrick smelled wrong and kissed wrong and his body was narrow and wrong and why the hell had he thought this was a good idea?

"Mm, you kiss just as nicely as I'd hoped," says Patrick, reaching up to finger the edge of Steve's jacket. "C'mon, baby, what say we go to a club I know? There's VIP. We'll have as much privacy as we want." Patrick cocks his head and gives him an assessing look. "Or we could just go back to yours?"

Steve blushes, but part of him is already starting to lash out, sick at the idea of being a trophy for someone to claim. "Uh, I thought, I thought we could meet up with one of my friends? He's at a, a sports event."

"Sure, baby, I guess," says Patrick, looking not very excited.

Steve pulls out his phone and steps away, sending a text.

He gets back an excited reply almost immediately, with promises of tickets left at the door. Great.

Clint will know what to do. Clint, for all his aw-shucks doofiness and dumpster fire of a life, is surprisingly perceptive and helpful with other people's lives. ("It's coz I've field-tested all the wrong answers, extensively," he'd once said.)

They call an Uber and hop in, because ain't no cabs in Red Hook at that hour. Patrick looks confused when Steve says, "Madison Square Garden," obviously trying to rack his brain to figure out what team is playing the Garden that night.

Patrick's face when he sees the big banner across the Garden advertising Monster Jam 2016 is something Steve will treasure for the rest of his life.

Patrick lasts approximately 20 minutes inside, by which time The Most Accurate Shot in the World™ has dropped a chili dog on Patrick's shirt ("Aw, sorry, man, my bad") while trying to pass it to Steve. When Patrick stands up to make his excuses, his jeans peel off the chair only with difficulty, thanks to old, spilled soda on the seat.

"Aw, bye, man! Loved you in that thing with ScarJo," Clint calls out as Patrick leaves. Then his face changes completely from doofus to calculating sniper as he looks at Steve. "So what's up with Mr Axe Body Spray? I'm guessing Natasha."

Steve nods, his head in his hands.

"Dude, *don't* let Natasha set you up. She has awful taste in men. C'mon, she's dating *me*." Then Clint flicks his fringe out of his face and narrows his eyes at Steve. "What's *really* up, Steve?"

"My love life is a disaster," Steve groans.

"Brother." Clint throws an arm around Steve and gives him a rough hug of understanding. "Man, go buy all the beer you can carry and I'll listen to your tale of woe and then give you terrible advice that Natasha will kill or maim me for if she finds out about it."

Steve swears eternal secrecy and goes off to buy a tray of Bud Light. Clint's a good listener, in between pointing and shouting at the trucks destroying themselves and rolling over in the dirt arena of the Garden.

Steve gives Clint the broad outlines of his problem. "So, uh, that bike racer? James Barnes? He fixes my bike and... I really want to go out with him and I think it's mutual but Natasha found out some really bad stuff about him, about his past--"

Clint groans. "Of course she did. Thanks, Tash."

"--and, and, and he's not someone that Captain America can go out with. That *I* can go out with. He's not doing it any more, but his past is... real bad, Clint."

When Steve is finished, Clint looks at him over a red Solo cup. He taps Steve's chest once. "You're head over heels for this guy. You should go for it." Then he takes a big swig of his beer.

"You really think everything will be okay?" Steve asks, incredulous at the simplicity and assurance of Clint's response.

"Aw, no, man, it'll be a complete fuckin' disaster," Clint says, putting down his beer and leaning forwards. "Love always is." He points a finger at Steve. "But you'll be happy. And dude, show me where in the manual you got when you became Captain America that it says you should deny yourself happiness because of what other people think. They don't fuckin' own you, man. Even if they did, I think dying for your country counts as emancipation in full."

Steve smirks. "I didn't get a manual when I became Captain America."

Clint spreads his hands and grins. "Well, there you go. Go bang the fit biker dude, Cap." Then his eyes brighten as he sniffs the air. "Man, *corn nuts*. Did they have corn nuts in your time?"

Steve shakes his head.

"Aw, fuck, man! Be right back. You good with spicy?" Clint shambles off to buy snacks, and Steve is left to sip Bud Light and watch a truck called Bigfoot completely demolish a line of small cars. As the crowd roars and engines scream and metal crumples, Steve feels the weight of his indecisive fog lift off him.

On Monday, he'll go see James. They have a date to plan.

And a past to discuss.

\* \* \*

James finishes the bike for Steve on Sunday morning. He stares at it for a long time, assessing it and second-guessing a couple engineering decisions. Finally, he texts Darcy and asks her to come over.

When she arrives (in a clatter of high, wooden-heeled sandals, ripped-up drop-crotch skinny jeans and a sparkly Steven Universe t-shirt) he wordlessly takes her into the back and points at the finished bike. He's painted it a deep, metallic navy-blue with the slightest hint of red in the flake, and with two silver racing stripes along the side cowlings.

"Holy shit, dude! You finished it!" Darcy gasps. She looks at him, and then back to the bike. "Can I touch it?"

James nods. He folds his arms. He's worn long-sleeved shirts for the past two days, so Darcy wouldn't notice the bandages on his right forearm. Well, he's worn the *same* long-sleeved shirt for two days.

Darcy clonks up to the bike and runs a newly-manicured finger over it. "James. This might even be hotter than your racing bike. If he doesn't love it, then seriously, I'm not letting him in the shop ever again." Then she looks back at James, the shadows under his eyes, the rumpled t-shirt that he was still wearing from yesterday. "Uh, when's the last time you went to sleep?"

James sucks on his cheek and fails to look innocent.

"Are you bailing out of Indianapolis?" Darcy sounds scandalised. She knows that race, one of the biggest in the calendar, was only in three days, and it was a day to drive there plus a day of prep at the track.

James shoots her his frowny, don't-be-an-idiot face. "Help me deliver the bike, then I promise, I'll get some sleep. Racing bike's ready to go."

"Uh. Okay!" Then Darcy thinks for a moment. "Wait, how do you know where Steve lives?"

"Darcy. It's Red Hook. Everyone knows everyone else's business. The girls at the dog run

practically stalk him.” James throws a leg over the bike and motions for her to hop on the back.

“Wait part deux.” Darcy puts her hands on her hips. “James. Why do you need my help?”

“You will take the keys and a note and put them in his mailbox while I park the bike?” James says. “He's not interested in me. I don't want to...” he makes a half-circular motion with his hand, hoping it can express everything he can't say.

Darcy facepalms. “Oh my god. Seriously. How... okay, I need a minute about this.” She sighs operatically and stomps off into the front of the shop.

James can hear her banging her head against the counter several times, and he blushes. He's being shit about this, he knows it, but... he's going to keep being shit about it. Sorry, Darcy.

Back Darcy comes. Clomp, clomp, clomp. “Hoookay.” Darcy touches a red spot on her forehead. “Wow, that kinda hurt more than I thought.” Then she sticks her chin up. “James Buchanan Barnes, you are gonna get on that beautiful custom bike and deliver the keys to Steve yourself because you are a grown-ass man who regularly risks his life at the racetrack and dammit he's probably not even home.”

James glares back at her. The Russian underworld used to live in terror of that glare. “No,” he snarls.

Darcy throws her hands in the air. “I swear to God, I will withhold baked goods for a month if you don't man up and do this, Barnes.”

“You wouldn't,” James mumbles.

“Try. Me. Bitch,” Darcy says, clapping her hands on each word.

James shakes his head minutely and rolls his eyes, but starts up the bike. As it roars to life, Darcy shouts, “Also you will name your firstborn after me, or else!”

He's laughing as he pulls out of the shop.

Steve's apartment building is only about six blocks away. James parks the bike around back next to Steve's Harley (shit, he *is* home). He jots a quick note on a piece of paper, then stuffs the keys and the note in an envelope.

He can do this.

He slips into the building after holding the door for a young mother with a stroller coming out. Steve's mailbox is 4H, he'll just drop the envelope in and--

“...James?”

James freezes, his heart beating a million miles an hour.

He forces himself to relax, muscle by muscle, and turns. It's Steve, of course. Steve leaving for a late run, in a skintight t-shirt and shorts. Because life isn't fair, never has been and never will be.

He takes small comfort in the fact that Steve looks as flummoxed as he does. He feels cornered. He

doesn't want to look Steve in the eye, afraid of what he'll see.

He extends the crumpled envelope towards Steve. "I made you a bike, like Stark asked," he mumbles, looking at the ground.

It's only the years of training that keeps his hand from shaking.

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter title song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1-g5VG2pWg>

Pingu the dog is named after Pingu the penguin who was a stop-motion kids' cartoon in the UK and elsewhere in Europe: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyTNGkBSjyo>

Pechorin is the surname of the titular character in *A Hero of Our Time* by Lermontov which is A++ and you should read. (It's also quite short).

Thank you for all your amazing comments and support! It's really kept me going. Sorry for the angst in this chapter; I promise things get better soon. Well, maybe not super-soon (Ch 6 is a doozy) but we're getting there.

Steve's Harley-Davidson Street 750:

□

# Alone Again Or

Chapter by [WeAreWolves](#)

## Chapter Summary

Broken phones and broken bones.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

James is there.

James is there and he looks *broken*, like he hasn't slept in a week, in a dirty, faded red long-sleeved t-shirt and old jeans, his hair hanging down over his face.

Steve feels like he's having an asthma attack. He knows it's impossible, he doesn't have asthma any more, but he can't *breathe*. The building's foyer is too small. He can feel the heat coming off James' body, smell the motor oil and steel on his fingers where he's holding out the smudged envelope.

And he's made Steve a goddamn motorcycle.

"It's next to your Harley." A hand through dirty hair, raking it back. Then that angel face on that devil's body is looking right at Steve.

"Be careful with it. This is a lot more bike than you're used to, Steve," he murmurs in his whisky-and-cigarettes voice, a voice that pours like liquid sin into Steve's ears and straight down to his groin, lighting up everything on the way. "You'll be throwing your leg over something with more power than you've ever ridden before."

Steve realises he's been standing there for longer than is polite, gaping at James. He tries to think of something to say. But he's overwhelmed by James' unexpected proximity. His heart, noticeably silent for the past week, is thundering in his chest, demanding that he move closer still. And all Steve's doubts, all Natasha's concerns, they all vanish, drowned in pale blue eyes. He wants. He wants so badly. All he would have to do is reach out, fold James in his arms, and whisper, *never let me go--*

"Fine," James sighs wearily. He stuffs the envelope in Steve's mailbox, and turns to the door.

*Shit*, Steve thinks. "James, wait--"

James pauses, the door partly open. He doesn't look back. When he speaks, his voice is a rough mumble. "I saw you and your boyfriend kissing in front of the reggae bar. Congratulations. You looked happy."

Something cracks inside Steve. Before he can properly think about it, he reaches out and grabs James' arm, his left arm, directly below the red star. His bicep is so thick that even Steve's hand can't span it. James freezes, every muscle tense. He looks over his shoulder and glares at Steve, hard and cold and full of warning. That icy look, through long pieces of hair, *that glare*, Steve

thinks, there it is, *that* is the killer. He's just met Misha Pechorin.

And he realises he doesn't care.

He pulls James towards him and forces him against the wall of mailboxes. "Stop," he says. "Listen to me." His hands are on James' shoulders and Christ, it feels so *right* to have his hands on James. His shoulders are warm, and thick and hard with muscle, and Steve just wants to gentle his hands and skate them downwards. Down to where he can see the slight indentation James' nipples make in the old t-shirt, stretched across his chest. Down further to where low-slung jeans hang underneath hip bones framed by muscle. He shakes his head, trying to keep from losing his train of thought.

James avoids his gaze, jaw tight, body tense. He hasn't tried to escape Steve's grasp, tacitly acknowledging Steve's far greater strength, but also clearly not happy to be cornered like this.

"I've been a mess this past week," Steve begins. "For, for a number of reasons." He shakes his head again. "No, that's a lie. I've been a mess for one reason, and it's been you."

That gets James' attention. Suddenly those pale eyes are looking into his, shocked. Those red, bowed lips part in amazement. His body relaxes slightly in Steve's grasp.

"Yes," Steve says. "You." He's angry all of a sudden, furious at Natasha, at himself, at the expectations surrounding Captain America. "I can't handle how you make me feel. It *scares* me. So I went on a stupid date with a friend of a friend, and yeah, I let him kiss me outside the bar where we danced. But you, you, you obviously didn't watch for very long because I stopped it. It didn't feel right. It wasn't what I wanted."

Steve crowds in closer to James. Their chests are almost touching. The heat coming off James is palpable; the smell of him making Steve lose hold of what little self-control he has. As James looks up at him, Steve watches his pupils dilate, the paleness dimming to black lust. He has to look down and away. The only problem is, down just leads his eyes to the rest of James, to thighs that push around a 500lb racing bike like it's a feather. To the thickening outline in his jeans of a dick that looks to be just as impressive as the rest of him.

"Kissing that jerk made me sure of one thing, though. *You*." Steve can't even imagine what his own eyes look like right now. His entire body is a live wire, vibrating with need, desperate to cross the meager distance to James.

"All I want is you--"

And Steve tilts his head and presses his lips to James'. Presses *himself* into James.

James' lips part and his eyes flutter closed. A low, breathy moan escapes his mouth, into Steve's. Then his tongue is in Steve's mouth.

The average person kisses thousands of times in their life. Most range from the forgettable through the perfunctory to the pleasant. A few kisses, however, maybe three or four in a lifetime, stand out as perfect, soul-changing connections with another person. The first and last one of these Steve ever thought he would get had been grabbed from red lips in the back of a speeding car, before he jumped a plane bound ultimately for the Arctic ice. This one, though... kissing James up against the mailboxes in his apartment building foyer, Steve feels he is flying, falling through air still charged from a thunderstorm, but now there was only sunshine, only softness and warmth even as his



stomach clutches in fear from the altitude. He is Icarus, tumbling through the sky, wings burning, but the only thing below him was a pale blue sea, waters warm from the very sun that had set him afire.

Steve's whole body shivers as their tongues touch. It feels like he is changing frequencies on some cellular level, his soul moving to vibrate in tune with James'. Everything is perfection, from the velvet softness of James' lips to the stubble on his dimpled chin that rasps against his face as they kiss.

James reaches one hand around Steve's lower back and pulls their bodies together. The other hand circles the back of Steve's neck, keeping Steve in the kiss. They explore each other's mouths, their only language one of little gasps and the occasional grin as they bite and lick at each other's lips.

Steve's hands are finally free to explore down James' body. He traces down James' shoulders and across his broad chest, running his nails over James' already hard nipples and causing the most filthy, low moan to come out of James' mouth. He wants to cause that sound again, wants to find out what other noises James could make under his hands.

But then James shifts and, before Steve can react, flips them so it's Steve's back up against the wall of mailboxes. Steve sucks in a breath and breaks the kiss, startled. Then the air is forced out of him, ragged, as James slides one of his thick, solid thighs between Steve's legs and grinds against Steve's already very hard cock.

Steve looks at James, at kiss-bitten lips and flushed cheeks and eyes that promise as much sin as he can take. All he wants to do is take James upstairs, into his apartment, and throw him against the nearest flat surface. Get him out of those clothes. Reach down and find out what was under those jeans.

But not yet.

James leans in for another kiss and Steve puts his fingers against James' lips, stopping him.

At James' questioning gaze, Steve pulls the pin on a single word.

And rolls it into the space between them.

*“Misha.”*

Steve feels James' body grow taut under his hands, thick muscles shifting and hardening in preparation for a fight. “No.” Without relaxing, James pushes Steve's hand away from his mouth. He tilts his head and growls, “Only James. Misha is dead. Drowned in the Moscow River.”

James moves his hands to either side of Steve's head, trapping him. His thigh is still between Steve's legs, the heat of it still radiating electrically into Steve's crotch. James looks right into his eyes, assessing. “I was going to tell you, when we went on our date. Who told you? Shield?” His sinful mouth twitches into a lopsided smirk. “The Black Widow?”

Steve says nothing. Just looks into those pale eyes, and tries to figure out who is behind them.

Who he is falling so helplessly for: a bike racer, or a hitman.

“It doesn't matter.” James shakes his head. “But know this: I have chosen to do something other than what I was built for. I never wanted to be what I was. I chose racing.”

Steve's heart is beating too fast. He feels like he's with the Howling Commandos, about to launch an assault against Hydra. Terrified. Unready. Going into a battle where anything could happen. He doesn't want to do this. But he has to know. “What if Lukin forgives you? And you could return to Russia?”

James' perfectly bowed lips curl in a snarl. Steve hates himself for how it makes his cock twitch in excitement. “Fuck Lukin,” James rumbles. “My guns built his empire. I did it to pay a debt, not so I could become *Pakhan* one day.” The snarl softens into amusement. “Besides, why be Gangster #1? Once there, nowhere to go but down.”

Steve feels a small glimmer of hope in his chest. “What about your brothers? If, if Lukin or Daria moves against them?”

James snorts. “Look at you, an expert in the Russian mafia. Romanova told you, then. I doubt she is fond of me.”

Steve drops his gaze. He knows he can't hide his reaction. That James will know his guess is right. “You didn't answer my question,” he says.

James lets his left hand drift down from the wall along Steve's cheek, down his neck, and lets it come to rest on his sternum. His hand is warm, and calloused from work, and just slightly below Steve's throat. James leans in close, and whispers. “If my brothers are harmed, then I will drown the Moscow underworld in a sea of blood.”

Steve can't help the shiver that passes down him. James said those words without bragging. For him it was a foregone conclusion that he would be able to accomplish the singlehanded destruction of his old gang, a simple statement of cause and effect. If this, then that.

He tries to draw back, to step away, but James' hand at his throat keeps him immobile.

“Would you do any differently, if your Avengers were attacked?” James asks, tilting his head.

“I--” Steve starts. Would he?

Yes. He wouldn't *start a bloodbath--*

The inner door to the apartment building slams open, and a woman's voice calls out, firm and authoritative, “Step away from Captain Rogers!” It's Sharon, Shield's Agent 13 and Steve's babysitter. “Step away or I'll shoot!”

Steve knows without looking she has a gun pointed at James. He is halfway to saying, “Sharon, no--”, when he realises that the weight of James' hand against his sternum is gone.

James disarms Sharon and has her against the wall before anyone can react. Steve can only watch, slack-jawed, as James takes her down effortlessly, as efficient and cold as if he were a machine.

With one hand, he forces Sharon's right arm behind her back, close to breaking it. With his other, he manipulates her gun like it's an extension of himself, not even looking. He drops the mag out of

the gun into his back pocket, and clears the chamber. As he tucks the empty gun into the waistband of his jeans, he pushes Sharon's arm up a little higher and she gasps in pain. "I'm sorry," he says to her, a teasing malice in every syllable. "What were you saying?"

Steve doesn't know if it's his imagination or not, but James' Russian accent seems heavier than usual.

"James!" Steve says.

Then, when there is no reaction, "*Misha!* Let her GO!"

James snorts and takes his hands off Sharon. She sinks down the wall in relief, then stands up again, rubbing her shoulder. He tosses the empty gun at her feet and walks back into the foyer.

"So much for no more violence," Steve snarls under his breath as he goes to check on Sharon.

"I'm not allowed to defend myself?" James hisses back, knocking Steve's shoulder as he passes.

Sharon glares at him, a question in her eyes. "Steve, what the hell is going on?"

"Sharon, it's not-- he wasn't-- it's a misunderstanding." Steve makes an *ease off* motion with his hands, down around his waist. Then he stops as he realises it's a terrible mistake to direct any eyes down to his midsection because his running shorts hide nothing and he's still really riled up from making out with James.

He jerks his hands up and tucks them under his armpits. "I wasn't being threatened," Steve says, voice a little higher than usual. Don't look down, he prays.

It's too late.

Sharon looks down, sees the disturbance in his shorts, and blushes.

"Oh my god. I didn't know--". She looks at Steve, startled. "You're--"

Steve nods, hands still clamped under his armpits.

Then she looks at James, who just flashes her a cocky smirk, and shrugs.

Steve blushes so hard he thinks he might spontaneously combust.

"Okay. Uh. Well." Sharon says, glancing over her shoulder to the safety of the elevators.

James leans against the mailboxes and laughs to himself. He cards a hand through his hair.

"Stop laughing," Steve whispers.

"Why?" James snorts. "It's funny."

Steve grabs James' arm. "Show me the bike," he says, his voice a little desperate. He tugs James towards the door to the outside. "Bye, Sharon. I'm sorry."

“Steve, are you at least going to introduce me to your friend?” Sharon asks.

“No,” Steve says. “Maybe another time?” The last thing he needs is Fury and Coulson on his back about James, too. Thank heavens James was wearing a long-sleeved shirt; Sharon wouldn't be able to identify him from his tattoos like Natasha did.

Sharon sighs, and turns her gaze to James. “Are you going to give me my bullets back?” she says, her voice barbed.

James makes his *don't-be-an-idiot* face at her. “No.”

\* \* \*

Steve hauls James outside and walks with him in the midday heat around the corner to the parking area. His head is spinning. It was easy to put aside James' past when it was all hypothetical. But actually witnessing how he'd disarmed Sharon, with a cobra's speed and a vicious, graceful economy of motion... Steve now couldn't help but question how much was really in the past.

What had Natasha said? That you can't kill Winter. Not even James could, apparently. Maybe when you had that much violence in your history, there comes a point where it becomes an indivisible part of you, something that stains you forever. One perceived threat is all it takes for shy James and his bike racing to vanish, replaced by the killer they called Winter. Steve thought of the flat coldness in James' eyes as he took down Sharon, and understood for the first time how appropriate his codename was.

But, Steve thinks to himself, is that a reason to abandon James? If they were in a relationship, could Steve show him a better way? Perhaps with love, and time, James could change. Well, not change, but... *grow*, away from the darkness he was so clearly rooted in.

Steve sighs. Or maybe he'd just use any justification he could to get into James' pants.

Then James bumps him, and points. “There.”

Steve looks at the bike next to his Harley, and gasps. He glances at James, who quirks a half-smile at him and nods, giving him permission.

Steve almost runs to the bike. He feels like the luckiest kid at Christmas, except he'd never gotten much of anything for Christmas and right now it's high summer. The bike is *beautiful*, glinting in the sunlight in its dark blue and silver paint. It's clearly a compromise between the classic Harley style Steve preferred, and the faster, stronger bikes James raced. He runs his fingers over the handlebars. Even parked, the bike screams that it was made for speed.

James comes up behind him, the warmth of his body enough to pull harp-strings of desire throughout Steve. He slings an arm around Steve and rests his chin on Steve's shoulder.

With his free hand, he points things out on the bike. “I know you probably aren't a fan of so much fairing, but it helps reduce drag. It's also bulletproof, so they can't shoot your knees out.”

Steve glances back at James, his brow furrowed.

“What?” James says. “I'm a sniper. I think about what I'd do, then defend against it.” His stubble

scrapes against Steve's neck as he leans in and points down to the tyres. "They're bullet-proof as well. If they do manage to be shredded, you can still drive on them, but slower. Everything is built to withstand your strength. You won't accidentally crush the handlebars, or snap anything. All this added some weight, but I used some interesting alloys to balance it out. Let me know if she feels too stiff. The overall rider measurements, I just used mine but rounding up. Again, we can fine-tune it if she doesn't fit you right."

He brushes a kiss on Steve's shoulder, and murmurs. "The engine's almost 1,000cc and 300hp. The Harley is barely 60hp. This is what I mean by *be careful*, Rogers. I know you're strong enough to handle this bike, but I've built you a beast and you need to treat it with respect. Maybe get used to it on a track before you really open it up on the street."

"What are the engine specs on your racing bike?" Steve asks, turning to look James in the eye, suddenly curious. He'd never really cared about this sort of thing before but James somehow made it fascinating.

James smiles, his eyes full of mischief. "That's my secret," he says. He blushes and looks down at his feet.

*Don't do that*, Steve thinks. *I can't figure out what to do about you if you blush like that.*

"I'm off to a race in Indianapolis tomorrow. I'll be back end of the week. Try not to crash it before then?" James says.

Steve shoots him a Captain America Disapproves look. "I can actually go whole months without destroying a motorcycle."

"Rogers. The months and years where you were in the ice don't count towards your average."

Steve gives James a little shove, annoyed.

James just rolls his eyes and then, gently, puts his fingers at the top of the elastic of Steve's running shorts. He bites his lower lip and looks up at Steve. If there are rules of love and war, that look is definitely not fighting fair. "All I'm saying is, bring her in Saturday for a tune-up? And make a list of things you don't like. I'll fix them."

Steve nods. He doesn't trust himself to do anything else.

James leans in for another kiss and Steve gives in, a small whimper of need escaping his lips before they brush against James'. Where their first kiss had felt gentle, exploratory, this one is darker, rougher, as Steve takes control of it and crushes his mouth against James', pouring into the kiss all his need and his fear and his gratitude and his l--

--no, not love. He can't be in love.

A sportscar's brakes screech in the street nearby, and Steve doesn't miss the flicker of tension that goes through James' body. The hands move away from his waist, and James slinks into a protective stance that puts him unobtrusively between Steve and the black car that's just stopped about ten feet away from them. There's a thin black fighting knife held loosely in James' right hand and where the hell had *that* come from?

The car's tinted window powers down, and Steve sees Natasha's red hair and annoyed expression. "Steve! Where the hell have you been? We've been trying to call you for half an hour."

Then she fully notices James and her eyes narrow further. "Winter," she says, her voice empty of intonation.

James inclines his head ever so slightly. "Widow."

Steve moves to disarm the situation as fast as he can. He can't get a read on the amount of menace and tension emanating between the two emotionless Russians casually glaring at each other, but he really doesn't want to find out what will happen if it all kicks off. Aside from a lot of property damage. "Natasha! Sorry. I went out for a run and, and left my phone in the apartment."

He steps past James and puts himself between the two of them, trying to act as nonchalant as he can. "What's up?" he asks.

"Get to the Tower," Natasha says. "We're being called in."

"Okay," Steve responds. "I'll grab my shield."

"Need a ride?" Natasha asks.

"No. I have a bike," Steve says, and he can't suppress his grin as he points back to the new motorcycle.

Natasha raises an eyebrow then just shakes her head as she sees the bike. "I'll wait for you anyway," she says. "In case the bike blows up."

James' lip curls slightly and he turns away from Natasha. Not fully turning his back on her, but enough to be dismissive. Enough to be a calculated insult, treating the Black Widow like she is nothing to concern him.

Steve sighs and looks at James apologetically. "I have to go. Sorry. I'll call when I get back. Thanks for everything."

Steve knows it's not the best goodbye, but it's the best he can manage right now under Natasha's basilisk stare and with the confusion in his head about just how much of a killer James still seems to be.

James doesn't let him off easy, though. He steps into Steve's space and looks into his eyes, looking for answers.

"Am I to be your secret?" James asks, at last, under his breath.

"No, no..." Steve flounders. "I just need time to think. About who you are."

"What do you mean? You *know* who I am."

Steve sighs. "James, I... I can't get you out of my head. But I also can't get out of my head that, whatever you say, you're still Winter. Which means you're not the sort of person the Avengers save. You're the sort of person we stop."

James steps back as if he's been slapped. His face pales in shock. He ducks his head, shoves his hands in his pockets, and strides away down the street, his hair over his face.

Steve watches him go, and has the sinking feeling that his big hands have just broken something terribly delicate and important.

\* \* \*

James' message alert pings when he's halfway home. It's Darcy. She's texted him a single word: DEETS!!!

He throws his phone against a nearby brick wall so hard that it shatters into dust, and cracks the brick it shattered against.

*You're the sort of person we stop.*

*You're the sort of person we stop.*

*You're the sort of person we stop.*

He will never escape what he was built for.

He will never be anything but that, and he was an idiot to try. To believe that he could fool anyone other than himself.

*What are you, soldatik.*

He decides to leave early for Indiana. He knows it's not his best decision: he hasn't slept in 48 hours. But he can't stay. New York is suddenly far too small for him.

He absolutely can't face Darcy and her inevitable questions, so he takes Pingu in the truck with him. She is delighted; stupid dog's favorite thing is to hang her head out the passenger window until her jowls flap in the breeze.

He also grabs the two Serdyukov pistols and their silencers from the gun case hidden under his bed, and slips them into the concealed holsters in the truck. Then, finally, he pulls out his black leather jacket, the one he won in his first street race in Moscow as a sixteen-year-old kid, the one with a white cross painted on it for everyone he's killed. He slips it on, despite the heat, and it settles on him like an old, familiar skin.

*What are you.*

I am a machine.

\* \* \*

Steve ignores every warning James gave him about the new bike and floors it up the BQE towards the bridge, screaming past Natasha's Porsche, reckless and childish, wanting to drown his heart in the roar of the motor and the howl of the wind. The bike is a dream; the most perfect thing he's ever ridden. *Only because you haven't ridden James yet*, his traitorous brain supplies, and he has to swerve to keep from hitting a truck.

Avengers Tower arrives too soon. They're briefed and packed onto a quinjet: Hydra have a base high in the Alaskan mountains, where they're building weapons with stolen Asgardian tech. The tech is sentient, so what it's currently undergoing in Hydra's hands amounts to torture. Thor is adamant that they leave immediately. It's going to be a long ride out and then a longer march in, so they can maintain an element of surprise (and a chance of seizing the tech before it's destroyed).

Steve's mind isn't on the briefing, at all. It's on kiss-bitten lips and wounded eyes. He slips into the bathroom as soon as Coulson is done, and pulls out his phone, sending off a series of texts to James.

SGR: I'm sorry

SGR: Please just forget everything I said when we parted

SGR: I'm really bad at this

SGR: Good luck in the race. I'll see you Saturday?

SGR: PS the bike is unbelievable, thank you

James doesn't reply.

Steve doesn't want to talk to anyone; he grabs a seat by the window and stares out at the clouds, hoping he's radiating enough of a "keep away" vibe that nobody interrupts his privacy. The team are good about respecting their individual ways of preparing for missions: Clint and Tony stay up front, prattling and joking their nerves away for the entire ride. Bruce meditates. Natasha is usually silent, reading and re-reading all available intel. Thor normally sits with Steve and exchanges a few words now and then, but the Asgardian prince takes one look at Steve and goes and finds a seat near Sam, who proceeds to introduce him to Angry Birds.

But about half an hour into the ride, Steve hears Natasha settle in next to him. She sits in silence for about ten minutes, then puts her hand on his arm. "I owe you an apology," she says softly. "I



think I've done something unforgiveable.”

“No, I... you were right,” Steve sighs. “You remember when we fought those AIM battle robots? They were called super-adaptoids, or something?”

Natasha furrows her brow. “They were the blue ones, right?”

Steve nods. “Yeah. San Mateo.”

“What about them?”

“Sharon-- my SHIELD liaison-- she misinterpreted a situation between James and me in my apartment lobby, shortly before you arrived. She drew on James.”

“Oh, *shit*,” says Natasha.

“Yeah,” Steve breathes. “James just went... blank, and took her out as easily as if she was a kid with a water pistol, not a highly respected SHIELD operative. The way he moved made me think of those robots. That perfect, exact economy of motion they had.”

“Took her out? As in, killed her?” Natasha says, disbelieving.

“No. Disarmed her. Nearly broke her arm.”

“Oh,” Natasha says, the furrow of worry disappearing from between her brows. “Yeah. That's his fighting style, that cold hyper-efficiency. He's famous for it.”

“You're remarkably unbothered, for someone who was telling me a week ago to have nothing to do with him.”

“Mm,” Natasha hums, and Steve detects a hint of discomfort in the way she holds herself. “First, he *chose* to disarm her. If he wanted her dead, he would have thrown that knife of his and buried it in her eye. Easiest thing in the world.” She sighs, and slouches in her chair. “Second... I left something out when I told you about the mission where he shot me.”

Steve's mouth tightens as he waits for her to continue.

Natasha lets out a long breath. “I'm still angry about that mission, Steve. I'm *ashamed* of it. I'm the Black Widow. The best operative the Soviet Union ever created. I was SHIELD's great recruitment coup. And my first mission back in Russia, I blow it. I get taken out by an anonymous sniper from the other side. I wanted to hurt him, the way he hurt me. And I don't mean the gunshot wound. I mean waking up to my mission dead, his hand cut off, and my hand on a field dressing that had carefully been applied to my wound while I was out cold to keep me from bleeding out.”

“Oh,” Steve breathes.

“And so I lashed out, under the guise of protecting you. As if you need protection,” Natasha says, folding her arms, curling in on herself. “But today... I saw the way you two looked at each other. And I realised I need to tell you the whole truth.”

“What's that?” Steve asks.

“That I think there's something in there, in him, that's worth saving,” Natasha says.

“So do I,” Steve says. “I just, just hope I haven't screwed it up too badly.”

Natasha grins. “C'mon, Steve. He's known you for a while now. He's gotta realise that you're not exactly the smoothest operator.”

Steve snorts, then looks down at her fondly. “Natasha. Thank you for... for coming clean.”

She burrows her head into his shoulder and shuts her eyes. “I know how many people told Clint that I was irredeemable,” she whispers. “I've never forgiven a single one of them.”

\* \* \*

The mission is shit.

Clint gets shot off his perch by a Hydra patrol on the second morning, and breaks a leg falling down the mountain. Their SHIELD backup evacs him out to a hospital in Anchorage, but then the team has no sniper support. He moves Sam and Natasha back to cover their six, but they're not used to the stillness and patience of sniping and keep trying to sneak back into the main battle.

Steve makes the call to hit the base with brute force. Bruce Hulks up and he, Tony and Thor tear through the cantilevered, mountaintop base like knives through hot tin.

It feels better than he can imagine to smash through Hydra's troops. No grey areas. Just neo-Nazis and stolen tech and punching your way out of problems. Steve's on point when they reach the lab where the Asgardian orb-gem is being dissected, and there are a dozen guards plus some men in white lab-coats who'd obviously never gotten the memo about science being a force for good. Four hard throws of the shield and they're all down, with only a couple bullet grazes and a laser burn for his troubles.

“Coulda left something for me to do,” says Tony from behind him, sounding a little hurt. Thor is already striding past, towards the sentient orb-gem, tutting over its discomfort.

Steve comes down from his battle high and looks around him. He takes in the necks at wrong angles, the blood splashed onto consoles from head wounds, a back bent in a way that backs can't bend. A chill sinks into him as he realises he's killed everyone in the room.

He picks up his shield and slings it over his back, and walks out without a word. Sam catches up with him as they head back towards the entrance, where hopefully there will be a quinjet, and they won't have to hike back out to the RV.

“I know that thousand-yard stare, Cap. Nothing good ever comes of it. What's bugging you?” Sam asks.

Steve snorts. “I look down on people with guns. It's a matter of pride to me, to not carry one. To not kill. But I do, just not with bullets. I kill more than any of you. I'm a fucking hypocrite, Sam.”

“It was Hydra, Cap,” Sam says, slinging an arm over his shoulders. “What were you going to do, play patty cake with them?”

“I know. But who decides when it's right to kill? Are we really heroes, or just gangsters in spandex? Fighting other gangs over tech, and territory.” Steve squints as the bright summer sunshine glares off the snow on the mountain's flanks. The air is cool this high up, and it's so clean that it burns in his chest.

“You gotta believe we're making things better, Cap.”

“Are we?”

\* \* \*

They stop by Anchorage on the way home to visit Clint. He has to lay up for a couple more days before he can be moved back to New York, and Natasha opts to stay with him.

The doctors are making the team go in one by one to see Clint, so as not to overtire him. Coulson catches up with Steve as he's about to go into the hospital for his turn to visit. “Steve! A word,” Coulson says.

Steve looks down at Coulson, the exhaustion clear in his eyes. He hasn't showered or cleaned up since the mission; none of them have, but Coulson had been overseeing things in the mobile op room so was fresh in a new suit and clean face. He shakes his head. “Not now, Phil. Not, not a good time.”

Coulson frowns. “Steve. It's important. I need to talk to you about something we've discovered.”

“Is it going to end the world if I don't deal with it today?”

Coulson stutters, then shakes his head.

Steve waves him off. “Then talk to me next week. I'm going to see how Clint is doing.”

Clint is in good spirits, if covered with bandages and somehow with two black eyes. He's charmed the nurses into leaving a pot of coffee within reach of his good arm, and there's an empty pizza box at the end of the bed. The TV is on the sports channel; there's some soccer game on.

Steve tells him about the damage he caused with the shield; the deaths.

Clint shrugs as best he can. “Aw, Cap. You think half the guys we fight come back from the injuries we give them? Between the seven of us, we hand out TBIs like they're going out of style. Sometimes I think a clean death is better than dropping these guys with a spinal or brain injury. Not like Hydra's got a medical plan. Or maybe it does. I dunno.” Clint blinks at him. “Hey, do you think that's why people join Hydra? They have, like, *really* good medical? Like, fuck taking over the world, sometimes you just want dental coverage.”

Steve laughs. “Think heads regrowing qualifies as a pre-existing condition?”

“Beats the hell outta me, Cap. But that second head coming in's gotta fuck with your premiums.” Clint waves the coffee pot in Steve's general direction, but Steve shakes his head. He knows Clint's taste in coffee is a brew that tastes one step above battery acid. Clint shrugs, *all the more for me*, and swigs straight out of the pot.

“How do you do it?” Steve asks. “How have you done it for so long?” Clint is 35, a good seven years older than Steve, and has been a spy or special ops since he was 18 and ran away from the circus. When Steve joined up, everything was so simple. Hitler and Hirohito had to be stopped. It

was war. Everyone involved knew the risks. Now... who was an enemy? Who was a noncombatant? What is acceptable collateral loss?

“Well,” Clint sighs, “I’m really good at one thing. I can not do it, or I can do it for the bad guys, or I can try my best to figure out who the good guys are and work for them. And you’re never going to get it right, all the time. There’s so much shit I’ve gotten wrong, man. Bad calls. Bad missions. But then something happens like being the thing standing between New York and alien devastation, or... or following your gut rather than your orders and pulling a crazy redhead out of Russia, and... it doesn’t make up for the kills, or the bad calls, but bro, that’s what the nightmares are for, right?”

Steve groans. “You too?”

“Aw, man, why do you think all the apartments in the Tower are soundproof? Otherwise it’d sound like Evil Dead up in that joint every night.”

Clint reaches out, and winces. He pats Steve’s arm. “Never stop feeling bad about it, though. Or looking for other ways. Means you’re still trying to make the right calls.”

Steve thinks about how much Clint was the heart of the group. People tended to pass him over, because he was just a guy with a bow and arrow, but he more than held his own with the gods and freaks that made up the rest of the team, and more importantly, he grounded them. He knows Natasha wouldn’t be there without Clint. He’s not sure he would have lasted, either.

Steve realises Clint has said something to him while he’s been woolgathering. “What?”

“I said, I’m sorry about your friend.”

Steve looks at Clint in confusion. “Which friend?”

“Your-- James,” Clint says.

Then a look of shock passes over the archer’s face. “Holy shit, you don’t know, do you? Yesterday’s race?”

*Indianapolis*, Steve’s brain supplies. *There was a big OpenGP race this week in Indianapolis.*

Steve all but lurches with vertigo. “S-show me,” he chokes out.

“Aw, man, I dunno if you should see,” Clint says, backtracking. “Maybe this isn’t the best idea.”

“Show me now!” Steve says. He realises he’s shouting. “Sorry,” he backs down, hands raised. Then, “Please.”

Clint frowns and pulls out his phone, searching one-handed on Youtube for the right video. He passes it over wordlessly to Steve.

The crash is... awful.

Two riders acting as a team edge James out. His bike flips and lands on him, then – since they're out in front – another bike slams into them and then it's just a rolling, high-speed mess of metal and fire.

Where are the emergency crews? Everyone is just watching the carnage... nobody is moving to help. Steve feels like he wants to throw up. Somewhere in that mess is *James* and *nobody is helping*.

He can't figure out why the video stops, why it goes black and won't restart, and then he realises he's crushed Clint's phone. His hands are shaking.

He catches up with Coulson in the parking lot. “I need your quinjet,” he says. “Now.”

Coulson inclines his head with a little smile, and indicates the door of the jet. *All yours*.

“Thanks, Phil. Tony will get your team home,” Steve says, climbing in.

“Of course, Steve. May I ask where you're going?”

"No." Steve jabs the button to close the door. "It's personal."

## Chapter End Notes

Chapter title song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsZuNxxQVo>

Welp. Warned you this one was going to hurt. Things get better from here, trust me.

I'm updating weekly from here on in; expect new chapters on Tues/Weds unless my life falls apart.

BQE: Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The main north-south freeway in Brooklyn and Queens, parallel to and across the East River from Manhattan.

TBI: Traumatic Brain Injury.

Also: I will never stop making jokes about the medical plans of evil organizations.

Specs on Steve's new bike are based on the Kawasaki Ninja H2R, the fastest production bike currently made.



# Such Great Heights

Chapter by [WeAreWolves](#)

## Chapter Summary

Tea & sympathy.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Steve hauls the quinjet into the air, points it southeast, and guns the engines. He's cutting across Canada towards Montana when his phone lights up with text alerts.

He flicks the plane to autopilot and swipes at the screen of his phone. James...?

No.

It's his team, and by God, do they have his back.

NAR: Methodist Hospital, Indianapolis. Go get 'em, tiger.

AES: I've installed Jarvis on your phone. You need anything, just ask him. Or me.

CFB: gon be ok dude thos crashes always luk worse then they arse

CFB: \*are

CFB: duck u autocorrect

CFB: GODDAMNIT PHONE WHEN HAVE I EVER WANTED TO TALK ABOUT DUCKS

STW: Bruh. I don't have crazy intel or my own AI but

STW: attachment: [flash\\_the\\_sloth.gif](#)

STW: this is me hearing about you and your guy

The trip to Indianapolis is five hours, even in the jet. Steve hasn't showered or changed and he's quite sure he still has bits of Hydra employees splattered on his uniform. He fiddles with his phone, wondering if he should call Darcy.

He does try to call James, figuring that just showing up at his hospital might be a bad idea, but nobody picks up. He rings the shop next, and nobody picks up there, either. Then he realises it's probably because it's 10pm at night. Which means he won't get in to the hospital until considerably after midnight.

Well, third shift is just going to have to deal with a dirty, sweaty national icon, in a blood-stained uniform.

\* \* \*

Third Shift has so far dealt with four overdoses, a fatal domestic shooting, two rapes and a man with a lightbulb up his ass, plus the usual Cat 6 GOMERs, just in the half hour before the National Icon arrives at the intake desk demanding information on a patient that he is most definitely not related to. Some dumb little racer boy who's broken himself all over the Speedway, like they all do, sooner or later.

Third Shift badly needs more coffee. And a raise. "I'm sorry. I can't give that information out," she says, *again*.

National Icon is looking like a golden retriever puppy that's been kicked. "Is-- Is he even here?"

Third Shift sighs and prepares to go through it one more time. Third Shift became a nurse because she wanted to make a difference, wanted to help people, but a dozen years in a city hospital has made her so completely done with two things: everything patients and their relatives say, and everything they do.

"Look, Captain Rogers--"

"Please, call me Steve."

Third Shift sighs and taps away at the computer. The screen freezes on one of the drop-down menus. She wants to bang her head against the keyboard but that would mean her face would come in contact with something Second Shift's gross fingers touched and there is not enough Purell in the *world*.

"Steve. Patient confidentiality means we can't give out any information on patients without their consent. Unless you have a court order, or you can call him and ask him to clear you, we can't tell you anything about James Barnes."

Oh no. National Icon looks like he's about to cry. "He, he's not answering his phone. Can you just tell me if he's going to make it?"

Behind him come three drunk sorority girls supporting a fourth who has (Third Shift's gonna call it) alcohol poisoning and a severe concussion.

The Kappa Kappa Drama Queens spot the National Icon and one of them begins to squeal, hitting a frequency so high that every dog for a mile around immediately comes down with a migraine.

The National Icon ducks his head and wipes at his eyes with the back of his wrist. The burgeoning tears smudge clean spots into the dirt and gunsmoke on his face.



“Get out of here while you still can,” Third Shift says to National Icon, her voice low, not looking at him.

“Ma'am. I can't. I'm not leaving here without--”

Third Shift is *definitely* not paid enough for this shit.

She holds up a hand that was well-manicured a week ago. “End of the parking lot. Nurses' smoking bench. I'm going on break in five.” She raises an eyebrow at him.

The National Icon blinks at her for a moment, snuffles, then throws her a little salute. “Ma'am,” he says, then turns on his heel and leaves.

“Ladies,” he nods to the sorority girls, who nearly drop their injured friend in order to make grabby hands at him.

Huh, Third Shift thinks, now I understand why that boy carries a shield.

Then she stands up behind her desk and points. “Okay! Sorority girls, exam room four. A doctor will be right with you.”

\* \* \*

Steve finds the bench. It's just off the main hospital grounds, across an access road from the employee parking lot and next to a rhododendron that's seen better days. And it reeks of cigarettes.

Despite the smell, he finds it pleasant sitting there, in the dark and the quiet, the stars above him. It feels like forever since he's just had time to be quiet and think. Since he's *stopped*. The night here is cooler than New York, a pleasant 60 degrees, a dew just starting to form on the grass. He's hit with a wave of exhaustion and briefly contemplates just lying down on the bench and napping, but then the nurse in the burgundy scrubs comes out of the darkness towards him.

She sits on the other end of the bench and taps out a Virginia Slim. “Looked up your friend,” she says quietly, glancing around to see if anyone else was around. Steve is aware she could probably lose her job for this.

“How bad is he?” Steve whispers back. He's fidgeting, tapping his leg with his thumb.

She lights the cigarette and takes a long, pensive draw. “For a Speedway crash victim? He has an angel looking out for him for sure. He walked out of here at 4pm today, soon as his mandatory 24 hour observation period was over. Well,” she continues, ashing her smoke, “walked might be pushing it. *Hobbled* out of here.”

Steve lets out a breath he wasn't even aware he'd been holding. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you so much.”

The nurse shrugs. “Chart says he was a dumbass who refused every scan and test, just wanted to be patched up so he could go get his dog.”

Steve snorts out a laugh. “Yeah,” he says softly. “He is kind of a dumbass.”

“Not having a CAT scan after your head meets pavement at over 100mph is not *kind of* dumbass,

it's Olympic gold medal dumbassery. But hey, people.”

“Yeah, well, I jump out of planes without a parachute.”

“Dumbass.”

Steve stands and puts his hand on the nurse's shoulder. “Seriously though. Thank you. You, you have no idea how much this means to me.”

The nurse huffs in mock exasperation. “Just don't be coming up to honest working-class people at 2am and start getting all teary-eyed on them. Shit's not fair.”

\* \* \*

It's shortly after dawn on Friday when Steve arrives back at the Tower. He leaves the Quinjet on the roof and heads straight down to his guest quarters. He's exhausted, he stinks, and all he wants to do is take a hot shower and then go to sleep.

Well, no.

All he wants to do is find James.

But according to Jarvis, James' truck isn't at the shop, and hasn't been picked up by any of the toll or traffic cams on the main routes back from Indianapolis to New York.

Which means James doesn't want to be found.

Steve's tired brain advances a dozen separate explanations why that is, from the tragic (had a brain hemorrhage, drove off the road and is dead in a ditch) to the hopefully implausible (went back to Russia and re-joined the *bratva*). The thought of James driving long-distance in his condition is terrifying, and his mind won't let go of images of the truck crashed on the side of the freeway.

He knows this is exhaustion talking, so he mostly ignores the doom-laden voices in his head. He finds it harder to ignore the ones that tell him that the crash is all his fault. The ones that remind him how broken James had looked in the foyer of his apartment building. The ones that keep replaying James' devastated expression when they parted. *He's going to disappear and you'll never see him again*, the voices say. *And it's no more than you deserve*.

He desperately wishes, for the first time in a long while, that he could get drunk. Up there in the sky in his priceless apartment and in his amazing new science body, with everything around him tasting of ashes.

He calls James again. Still no answer. Then he leaves a message on the shop answerphone for Darcy, asking for any news she has on James.

He cradles the phone as he sits on his bed and stares out his Tower apartment's full-length windows at the Manhattan morning, at all the workers pouring out of Grand Central towards their offices, clutching their coffees and handbags and satchels, bustling towards the final workday of the week, completely unaware of how the world has already ended.

The phone in Steve's hands remains silent, no matter how many times he looks at it.

At last, somewhere north of 11am, Steve admits to himself there's nothing more he can do, and collapses into bed.

And then he remembers: he has a tune-up appointment on Saturday. As sleep finally overcomes him, he thinks, *Please, God, let James be there.*

*Please let him still want to see me.*

\* \* \*

The next morning, however, Steve's bike is nowhere to be found.

He had left it parked next to Natasha's Porsche in the team's corner of Stark's underground garage, but now the space sits empty. Steve stares, half-expecting the bike to magically re-appear because he had left it *right there*.

Steve is almost white with fury when his still-exhausted brain jumps to the obvious conclusion. As he snarls, "*Jarvis*," he hears the cargo elevator beep.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Tony says as the doors slide open. He's looking guilty as hell and standing in the elevator with Steve's custom bike. The bike James had made him.

"Please tell me you didn't change a single thing on that bike," Steve growls.

Tony fidgets. "Touchy. Jeez. I paid for this bike, Steve. Or I will. Which reminds me, your guy needs to send me a bill. Send Pepper a bill, I mean. Anyway," he says, wheeling the bike out. "It checked out. No bombs or tracking devices, that was nice--"

"James wouldn't--" Steve begins, striding forwards to take the bike away from Tony. Part of him registers that he's being unnecessarily possessive over the bike, that his anger over the idea of anyone else touching it, working on it, is abnormal. But at this exact moment in time, he does not care.

"Steve," Tony says, tucking his chin and giving Steve his best I-am-so-much-smarter-than-you-it-hurts look, "I helped Natasha dig up his file. Ex Russian Special Ops, from a ghost unit? Turned big-league mob enforcer? C'mon. Pardon me if I'm not giving him the benefit of the doubt here."

"James *wouldn't*," Steve grits out, running his fingers over the bike, checking that nothing's different than he remembered.

"Well, he didn't, I'll give him that," Tony sighs. "And, you know, it's an all right job. I mean, I have a few experimental alloys and a new fuel-injection system that would be better, not to mention potentially powering the whole bike with a mini arc reactor, but then I'm a billionaire super-genius and he's not."

Steve knows that *all right* is just about the highest complement Tony can give. Tony's superlatives exist in some bizarro world where *fabulous* means *commonplace* and the right sort of hesitant *okay* means *impressive beyond words*.

Steve swings a leg over the bike and is about to roar off without a backward look, but then he hears Tony scuffing his feet on the cement floor. Tony is in a suit; Gucci loafers on his feet and yellow-

tinted sunglasses on his face. The outfit, so early on a Saturday, undoubtedly means that he's spending the day roped into corporate work: lunches and speeches and charities. Shaking hands and making polite conversation with strangers. There's a small grease stain on the French cuffs of Tony's shirt, a memento of where he'd rather be.

Steve looks back at Tony, at the tired, lonely expression on his face as he peers down at an errant spot of yellow paint on the pavement. Tony shoves his hands in his pockets and clears his throat.

"He builds good stuff, your guy," Tony says quietly, still staring at his loafers. "Tell him... tell him I have a wind tunnel, if he ever wants to come test drag on his bikes. No-one ever uses it but me, and it would be fun to, uh, yeah. He can use it if he wants."

"Thanks, Tony," Steve says, and he can't help the smile that sneaks across his face. "You're a good friend."

"I am a *fabulous* friend," Tony barks back.

"You're an *all right* friend."

Tony looks delighted for a moment, a child who unexpectedly finds themselves in possession of the present he most wanted in the world. Then his face rearranges itself into its usual scoffing expression and Tony flaps a hand at Steve as he turns away. "Yeah, yeah. Get lost, Rogers, don't you have someplace to be?"

Steve grins and pops a wheelie as he passes Tony, just to be a jerk.

\* \* \*

The weather is shifting from muggy to cool, and the Brooklyn skies are pregnant with rain. The soft, even lighting of the overcast day makes the colours of James' old red-and-white F150 pickup almost glow against the drab alley, and it's the most beautiful thing Steve has ever seen. The warm glow of the shop feels like coming home: the cherry-red Indian Scout in the window, the neon above it reflecting around the front office's white walls. Darcy engrossed in something on her phone behind the counter. Pingu probably snoring on the sofa; the tea-water boiling in the kitchen; James tinkering with an engine.

Steve cuts the engine on the bike and walks it in through the shop's big double doors, into that clean, well-lit space. He can't stop the big grin on his face as he walks in. James made it back. He can fix this. It's going to be okay.

But then Darcy looks up.

Her precious iPhone clatters to the ground and she is out from behind the counter as fast as she can move. It would be impressive, if she didn't stumble over the laces of her high-heeled sneakers (!) on the way out. She has a baseball bat in her hands, is wearing what looks like a cross between a t-shirt and a dress with a neon Frankenstein face on it, and she is mad as hell.

"How dare you," Darcy hisses, low and mean, slinging the bat over her shoulder. "How *dare* you show up here. Get *out*."

"Darcy, please, put down the bat," Steve says, hands up in a pacifying gesture. He knows he can get the bat off her easily, but he'd prefer to do things the hard way.

"You have made him *so fucking miserable*," Darcy all but screams, tears welling up in her eyes. "Dude, he nearly *died*. I guess you think it's OK or something because he doesn't show it when he's hurt but just *fuck you*, asshole. Fuck you for doing that to him."

"Darcy!" Steve shouts back. "I've been calling him all week. I flew to Indianapolis after my mission to try to see him but I got there too late. All I've been doing for the past six days is trying to say I'm sorry and I don't know what more to do, I really don't, so please give me a fucking chance to say it in person."

Darcy whacks the bat against the shop's cement floor, and lets go, staring numbly at it as it bounces end over end then clatters to a halt near the doors. "Fuck you. Just go," she sobs.

"I'm not going anywhere," Steve says, and okay, he says it pretty loud, but at that point his hands are balled into fists at his sides and if Darcy thinks she is going to keep him from seeing James she obviously has a very poor acquaintance with his entire goddamn history. "You want me to leave, you're gonna have to make me."

"Shut up," comes a tired, husky voice from the doorway into the workshop. "Both of you. Shut up." James touches his head and winces. "Everything hurts bad enough without shouting."

Steve gapes.

James is in a baggy pair of navy sweatpants, a frayed, faded red zip-up hoodie and no shirt, just a lot of bare chest, and a compression wrap for broken ribs around his midsection. His left arm is in a sling and his left leg has a brace on it, all the way up to the thigh. His head isn't bandaged, but there's the remains of what must have been some pretty spectacular bruising on his left cheekbone and a fading black eye on his right. He's barefoot. As usual, he looks like an angel, albeit one who hit every branch on the fall down from Heaven.

"Darcy," James mutters. "Put the bat away. If anyone does any beating up in my shop, it will be me."

"But--" Darcy starts.

"I'm better at it," James says, tired and offhand.

"*But--*" Darcy tries again, incredulous, indicating James' casts and bandages.

"Even like this," James replies.

Darcy folds her arms and looks down her nose at him. "Uh-huh," she says, in a tone of utter disbelief. "What are you going to do, trip 'em with your crutches?"

"No," James sighs. He reaches behind his back and suddenly in his right hand is one of the Serdyukov pistols, a wickedly long silencer fitted to the end of its muzzle. He holds it loosely, muzzle pointed up, fingers open, and raises an eyebrow at Darcy.

"Hoooooly shit that's a big gun," Darcy squeaks. "Ohhhkay, got it, bat going away now."

James tucks the gun away again as Darcy collects the bat and replaces it behind the counter. When she's done, he motions her over and puts his good hand on her shoulder. "Darcy," he says softly, looking down into her wide brown eyes, "You are never to try to defend this place. If anyone ever

comes here to start trouble, they are professionals and I will deal with them. You will take Pingu and get as far away as possible. Promise me?"

Darcy chews on her lower lip and looks down, her face a mask of sadness.

"Ah-ah, Daryushka." James tucks two fingers under her chin and raises it so she can't avoid his gaze. "I need you to promise me you will run. It's easier for me, if I have to fight, to fight alone. Understand?"

Darcy nods, and very quietly, she says, "I promise I'll run. If you promise you'll always come back." Her eyes narrow and she holds up a hand. "You gotta pinkie promise, though."

James smiles. His entire face lights up with it, eyes crinkling in amusement, as he hooks his pinkie into Darcy's. "Okay. Pinkie promise. No dying without your permission."

Darcy's delight takes physical form; she bounces a couple times on the balls of her feet, pecks James on the cheek, and then goes to rescue her phone from where it's bleeping away with text alerts, unattended, under the counter.

"You expecting trouble?" Steve asks.

James shrugs, still leaning against the door frame. "I always do. The photos of us from the gossip site... they've been seen, in Moscow. And people know I'm injured. If anyone tries something, it will be now." He scratches at the bandages on his ribs, then looks up at Steve, his eyes cold and hard. "But like I told you, I will race bikes and I will defend myself. That's it. The Avengers won't have to stop me... unless they come for me."

Steve can feel the heat of his blush move down his body in waves. He rubs the back of his neck. "Did, um, did you get my texts?" he asks.

"Broke my phone last Sunday. Haven't gotten a new one yet. When did you send them?"

"You can have my old 5S if you want," Darcy calls out from her regained perch behind the counter.

"Oh," Steve says. "I... all week. Starting Sunday afternoon."

"Did you really come to Indianapolis?" James asks. He's doing that little thing he does with his mouth when he doesn't quite believe something, lips parted in the beginning of a pout.

Steve nods, and thinks to himself, *this is it*. Before he can get into an entire internal dialogue about what a terrible idea this is, he strides over to James and gets down on his knees. James looks down at him in surprise, eyes wide, a high blush in his cheeks, as Steve seizes James' right hand. He presses James' fingers to his chest, over his heart, so he can feel how fast it's beating.

Then he looks up in those ice-blue eyes, at the confusion in them, and says, "James. I said something awful and stupid on Sunday, and as soon as it came out of my mouth I wanted to take it back. I want to say I'm sorry, but I don't think sorry goes far enough. James. Please. Anything. I want to start over. I want to make it up to you in some way, just tell me how. You're... you're a really good person, James Barnes. You're kind and you're smart and you're funny and everyone who meets you seems to fall a little bit in love with you. Or a lot. Some of us fall a lot."

Steve looks up at James' bruises and bandages, the damage on *that body*, and his breath starts coming in ragged heaves. "God, look at you. You could have *died* in that crash, and I never would have gotten to tell you I'm sorry, and how much you mean to me. I was terrified, when I got to

Indianapolis, and they wouldn't tell me *anything*, not if you were alive or dead, and all I could think was this is *my fault--*”

James slides down the wall until he is squatting on his right leg, left extended outwards awkwardly due to the brace. He somehow manages to make it look graceful, which Steve thinks can't actually be possible, but then before Steve can think of anything else James' hand is in his hair and he is being pulled forwards into their third kiss.

James tastes of smoky tea and strawberries. Steve is only dimly aware of the cold of the cement floor, the distant rumbling of thunder over the city as the weather starts to make up its mind. James is kissing him, not fast, not hard, just slowly and gently as if the connection between them, the act of touching at all, is enough. And it is. Lips and tongues brush over each other, soft and wet, and Steve feels like they are building their own world made of warmth and heartbeats and shared breaths. He never wants it to end. He wants to live in this new world forever.

Through the haze of soft lips and stubble and sweetness and pleasure coursing through him, Steve becomes aware of a strange, high squeaking sound, as if a bat somewhere is in mortal pain.

Steve breaks the kiss and looks for the source of the noise. It's coming from Darcy, who is pointing her phone at them.

“Darcy,” James murmurs without looking at her, “I will shoot that phone out of your hand if you don't stop filming.”

“What, are you like, secretly, Leon the Professional or something?” Darcy asks, lowering her phone. “Y'know, I did kinda think you might be Daredevil for a while, but as if you'd ever go to Manhattan willingly.”

“No. I just race bikes. That not enough?” James says.

“You are *really* good, though,” says Steve quietly, stroking his thumb down one of James' perfect, aristocratic cheekbones. “It startled me. I've never seen anyone who moves like you.”

James' eyelids lower and he blushes at the compliment. He leans into Steve, tucking his face into the side of Steve's neck. “That's because...” he exhales, stubble brushing against the incredibly sensitive spot below Steve's ear. Then he falls silent.

“Because what?” Steve asks, twining his fingers into James' long hair. God, he wants to stay wrapped up in James forever.

He can feel James' lips against his neck, moving into a smile. “It's nothing. Never mind,” James whispers. Then he nips at the sensitive spot on Steve's neck, because he's a jerk.

Steve is going to ask again, but is stopped by a crack of thunder across the sky. Both he and James flinch slightly. Too many bombs; too many battles. He idly wonders if James was Red Room, but discards the thought immediately. He's too young. The timeline isn't right, and neither is his gender. Plus, he's sure Natasha wouldn't have left *that* out in her infodump.

The air that begins to gust in from the doors crackles with ionization and Steve can feel the temperature and pressure dropping.

James pushes himself up, plants a distracted kiss on Steve's temple, and calls over to Darcy. “It's going to rain, Daryushka. Lock up the shop and go home, or you'll be caught out in it. We'll close early today.”

“Really?” Darcy sweeps her phone and a couple bottles of nail polish into her giant, colourful fabric handbag and sing-songs, “Awesome!” Then she looks over at James, fond and worried. “You sure you're going to be okay?”

James smirks at her and gives her a thumbs-up. “I have the sofa, I have blankets, I have takeaway menus. All good. Now, go. Hurry.”

“Okee.” Darcy clumps towards the big wooden doors and leans down to pull up the heavy bolts that keep them propped open. “You think it's gonna flood?” she asks as she pushes the doors shut. Red Hook is low ground, near the waterfront, and in bad thunderstorms and hurricanes, the streets near the docks can feel more like canals than roads.

James shrugs. “Maybe. Hope not.”

“OK. I'm coming by tomorrow to check on you,” Darcy says, peeking around the narrow opening between the mostly-closed doors. Then she points. “Steve, you're still on probation.” The doors clack shut and there is the heavy sound of the lock turning, then Steve and James are alone in the shop.

“Steve, you should go too,” James says, twining his fingers into Steve's heathered-blue t-shirt.

“Do you want me to go?” Steve asks.

James shakes his head. “No.” He smiles a sad, small smile. “I'd invite you upstairs, but...” he indicates his leg brace. “I can't get up there myself.”

“Oh.”

“Spiral staircase seemed like such a good idea at the time,” James snorts.

“It is a good idea. It's beautiful. I love this place, you know,” Steve says, softly, hooking his fingers into the low waistband of James' sweatpants.

He leans in, resting his forehead gently against James'. “I'm sorry about the crash. I keep thinking if I hadn't been such a jerk, you wouldn't have--”

James pulls away and glares at him. “Steve.” That calculating, pale gaze takes in Steve's broad, sagging shoulders, the furrow in his brow. He leans forwards and rubs his chin on that furrow, and he's tall enough to do that (if slightly on his toes), and Steve lets out a ragged exhale because that's strangely exciting. “Steve, you worry too much. The crash was not your fault.”

Then James is looking at him with that little head tilt and Steve has to shift because his cock is starting to get way too interested in proceedings. “I'm no amateur. I can keep my head in the game even when everything else is a disaster. Understand? In fact, sometimes those are the best races. When you can give up everything and just live in the moment.”

Steve bites his lip and nods. Then James reaches up and runs his thumb over Steve's lower lip, easing it out from his teeth. Steve never realised how sensitive lips could be, but right now that gentle, ghosting touch is sparking off tiny supernovas in nerve endings throughout his body. “Our racing circuit... it's changing. Used to be just a bunch of crazy people, mechanics and speed freaks, ex street racers, customizers. All meeting up to have fun.”

James sighs. “But now there are sponsors. TV cameras. And bike manufacturers are getting in on it, creating teams in secret, paying racers to use their designs. The people who took me out were part of the new Ferrari team. It won't be investigated. I'm seen as bad for the sport. Because we are



a sport now, apparently.”

Steve's face clouds over. “What the hell do they mean, bad for the sport? You're *amazing*. You race like you were born to do it--”

James waves a hand. “I never give interviews. Don't have a sponsor. Don't *bring in viewers*. Just want to race.”

Steve perches on the arm of the sofa. Pingu is, as expected, sleeping upside down on it, legs jerking and jowls whuffling in some sort of puppy dream. “Tony would sponsor you,” he says. “He likes you. He liked the bike. Says, um, says he has a wind tunnel you can use.”

“Really?” James says, furrowing his brow in suspicion. “For free?”

“Well, you'd end up with him keeping you company,” Steve says. “But Tony's good people. He takes a little while to get used to, but his heart is in the right place. I think he doesn't have many people he can talk with about mechanical stuff, that'll do anything other than just say yes to him. He'll force you to justify every engineering decision you make, but he doesn't give a shit about PR or interviews. I mean, most of his interviews end with him telling someone to fuck off.”

James chuckles, a low rumble of amusement. “I think I can handle that.”

They both look up as the first fat drops of rain begin to hit the windows and roof of the shop. A few moments later, the hesitant taps of the thunderstorm's advance guard have given in to a heavy, constant drumming of torrential rain, and even though it's barely 2pm on a late-August afternoon the heavy clouds make it seem near dark.

“Tea,” James says, hobbling towards the small kitchen at the back of the shop.

Steve is on his feet immediately, jerking the sofa enough that Pingu gives a startled snort, flopping onto her front and looking around. “No, don't. I'll get it--”

James waves him off. “No, no. Sit. Darcy has been making me tea all day and she can't make tea to save her life. You want some?”

“No, I'm good,” Steve says, caught up watching James' ass and back as he limps away. “I still can't believe you walked away from that crash.”

“Didn't walk away,” James says from inside the kitchen. “Was carried. But my racing leathers are heavily armoured. And crash looked worse than it was because of camera angle. They always show worst angle. *Brings viewers* when the crash looks bad.”

“It looked like your bike landed on you.”

“No. Very close. But I rolled and it missed me.” James comes back out, his blue mug in his right hand, steaming with hot tea. “Falling is an art. It takes practice.”

He holds the hot mug to the bandages on his ribs, and looks a little nauseous.

“They bad?”

“Just cracked. Ribs are the worst, though. Everything else I can handle.” He leans against the spiral staircase and sips his tea as he looks over Steve, undressing him with his eyes. “What's it like for you?” Steve is now kind of sorry he's not having tea, as the chill and the percussive sound from the summer thunderstorm begin to soak into his bones.

Steve groans. "Mine, because of the serum, I can feel them re-knitting. Makes me want to throw up. Four days of feeling very gross and sleeping all the time."

"Mm," James hums, taking another sip of tea and still gazing at him like he can see through Steve's clothes. Normally Steve hates this sort of look; he gets it way too often now, whereas people used to look through him altogether. But with James, it makes him want to actually take his clothes off and see what James' face would do then.

In fact.

Steve is over to James in a heartbeat, and gazes at him with mischief in his eyes. "I have an idea," he says, voice thick with desire.

James, who is a little shit, just raises an eyebrow.

Steve divests James of his mug of tea, snorting in amusement at the stricken look on his face. "I'll come back for it. Don't want to add burns to your list of injuries."

"Back from where--?" James says, the sentence ending in a distinctly undignified squawk as Steve sweeps him up in his arms, bridal-style, and starts carrying him upstairs.

James tenses momentarily then relaxes into Steve's arms and throws back his head and starts laughing. The laughter peals out of him, his body shaking, his amusement occasionally broken by little gasps of pain.

"What's so funny?" Steve frowns.

"You are," James says, still giggling. "You're ridiculous, Steve Rogers."

"Behave. Or I will drop you," Steve growls, mock-serious, as they reach the top of the stairs.

The upstairs area isn't quite what Steve expected. It's huge and loft-like, exposed brick painted white, with skylights currently doing nothing but amplifying the sound of the rain. A bedroom area is divided off from the main space by a partial wall of white bookcases, haphazardly filled with paperbacks. The main living area is surprisingly spare and modern, low black and chrome sofas softened by (fake?) fur throws. Vintage Monte Carlo Grand Prix posters in heavy black frames on the walls, as well as a few old, chipped-enamel signs in Cyrillic. A few muted throw rugs on the wide, waxed wooden floor. It's clean and sleek and masculine and... very James.

Pingu had followed them up and now the dog was busy rucking one of the sofa throws into a nest for herself. She turns around three times then flops down with an exaggerated sigh at the silliness of two-legged beings before resuming her nap again.

Steve walks to the other sofa then drops a kiss down on the top of James' head as they reach it. "In all seriousness, it's coming on to Saturday night. How about that date? I'll make you dinner and we can watch a movie."

James shifts in his arms, and Steve puts him down. Steve doesn't miss the little frown as James regains his balance. "I'm still your secret, then," James says.

"No! No," Steve says, his hands going to James' hips. "It's pouring out there, and you're not in

good shape. I thought about you sleeping on the sofa in the shop and I just... wanted to do something nice for you. I want to be around you.” *All the time. I never want to leave you.*

James sighs and leans against him. He's solid, and warm, and so broad. “I want to be around you, too,” he mumbles. “I'm sorry. I know I'm not the easiest person...”

“It's okay,” Steve says, and lifts James' chin up for their fourth kiss. “Neither am I.” It's almost not a kiss, just brushing lips past each other, softly, and whispering sweet nothings into the other man's mouth. It's easy, and relaxed, and Steve has the sense that both of them are holding back, respectful of the storm that will be unleashed if they do give in to their desires.

As they stand there in James' loft, in each other's arms, listening to the rain on the skylights and tracing each other's lips, Steve realises how utterly content he is. “This is nice,” he whispers, into the stubble next to James' mouth. “I feel like I've not had any time to be quiet in... forever. Second date, I promise--”

“Oh, so there's going to be a second date?” Steve is fairly sure James is trolling him, because the side of his mouth is quirking up in the start of that cocky, devastating smirk that is coming out more and more often as he becomes comfortable around Steve.

Steve almost regrets having to answer, because clearly the appropriate response is to kiss that smirk right off his face. And then pick him up and throw him on the bed. “Yes,” he says, matching that smirk with one of his own. “I'll take you out to the fanciest restaurant in town and show you off, and then everyone can see how gorgeous you are. And how much you make me happy.”

James just about melts at that, biting his lip and relaxing into Steve's arms. Steve strokes that long, dark-brown hair, twisting his fingers through its silky strands. “Unless you think that's going to get you shot, or something,” he says, more sombre.

But James only bites his neck, sucking a hickey into the tender flesh near his shoulder. “Don't worry about me,” he says, without lifting his mouth from Steve's shoulder. “I can take care of myself.”

“Seriously, though,” Steve says, gently pushing them slightly apart so he can look James in the eyes. “I'm not... out. I want this, and I want everyone to, to know about us, but... there's going to be a shitstorm, at first. We're talking your photo on the front page of the *New York Post* kind of shitstorm. Requests for more interviews. People taking photos of you on the street and following you around when, when you're trying to buy some damn milk in the supermarket.”

Steve exhales, and frames James' face in his hands, still gazing into his eyes. “I wasn't trying to hide you because I was embarrassed about you. I was trying to *protect* you. Because the celebrity thing? It's awful. And if you hate the publicity part of racing, I'm terrified that as soon as you get an inkling of what it's like to be Captain America's boyfriend, you won't want this any more.”

James is silent for long moments, considering. Finally he says, in a quiet, wrecked voice, “I can't think of a world in which I wouldn't want you.”

Steve finally gives in to the simmering heat that's been threatening to engulf him in flame since, well, since the first time James walked out to look at his Harley. He's just about to sweep James back up into his arms and march him off to bed, when James' stomach growls loudly enough to be heard over the rain.

They both stare at each other, shocked, and start cracking up.

“Also I want burgers,” James gasps, between heaves of laughter. “Burgers would be good.”

“The place round the corner?” Steve asks.

“Yeah,” James says, turning and hobbling into the bedroom area. “Get me three? And sweet potato fries. And two milkshakes.” He catches Steve's shocked expression as he sits down on the bed.

“What? I'm hungry.”

Steve smiles. “No, it's fine. I'm usually the one apologising for ordering a lot of food. Nice to not have to.” He has to force himself to turn away and move towards the stairs as James lies down on his back on the big white bed, hoodie falling open to reveal acres of muscled chest. “I'll be right back,” Steve chokes out.

The burger place is only around the block, but the rain is still pelting down and Steve comes back almost half an hour later soaking wet, blue t-shirt and khakis sticking to every inch of his body. He takes the spiral stairs three at a time and is about to call out to James when he realises how silent the apartment is. He drops the plastic bags of food on the counter and Pingu wakes up at the smell, her white-tipped tail thumping a happy beat on the sofa. Steve motions to her to be quiet, then slips his sodden boots off and pads as silently as he can to the bedroom area.

James is asleep. His right arm is thrown over his head and his hair is loose, and partly across his face. He is angelic in the soft half-light filtering in from the skylights, the diffusion even making his scratches and bruises seem less dramatic than under the bright white shop lights a couple hours before. He looks young and innocent, and so impossibly beautiful, as if someone had designed the perfect man.

Steve reaches down to brush away the hair covering James' face--

--And before he can process what's happening, he's on the floor and has a knife to his throat.

James' eyes are cold and blank and do not know him. Steve grabs James' forearm to ease the knife away, but holy Christ, James is *strong*, and the knife is pressing against his skin--

Steve's mind runs at lightning speed through tactics, how he can get James off him without worsening his injuries. He's just about to smack James in his cracked ribs when James comes back to himself. His eyes widen in horrified recognition of what he is doing.

James rolls off Steve onto the floor; onto his back, and the knife clatters out of his grasp onto the floorboards. He bangs his head a couple times against the floor. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he says, furious with himself. He rakes his hand through his hair and won't meet Steve's gaze. “Fuck, Steve, I'm so sorry.” His breathing is rough and then he just curls up on his side on the floor, as much into a ball as he can with his injuries, and chokes out a few sentences in Russian that sound like cursing.

Steve reaches out to lay a hand on James' shoulder but James flinches away, shivering with nerves, as if expecting to be hit.

Steve sighs, and pulls himself up into a cross-legged position. He stares at James' back and thinks how everything with him is two steps forwards, one step back. Every time Steve thinks he's passed through the final mystery shrouding James, there's another enigma waiting beneath. It made James fascinating; intoxicating in a way nobody has been to Steve since Peggy. But a dull alarm was beginning to ring in the back of his head.

He has no problem admitting that James throwing him to the floor was a textbook-perfect takedown, the sort of throw Natasha and others like her who started young excel at, using an opponent's size and imperfect balance against them. He was off balance leaning over the bed, James took advantage of it, fine. But there was something *else* about the way James fought, and it had shaken him when he'd seen James disarm Sharon and it buzzes more insistently in his head now, just out of reach, not adding up to any more sense other than a little voice whispering *he's too good*.

Steve taps the floorboards and calls for Pingu. The chunky little pit bull drags herself off the sofa then waddles over, nails clacking on the wooden floor. As soon as she sees James on the ground, she does a happy little dance with her feet and scampers over, sure that this is some excellent new game her owner had decided to play. She sticks her big wedge head into James' face, nudging him with her wet nose. James stops shaking and throws his good arm over Pingu, pulling her into a hug.

A few minutes later, James pulls himself into a sitting position. His hair still hangs down over his face and he won't meet Steve's eyes. "Thank you," he mumbles. "I'm sorry."

Pingu flops down in his lap and he ruffles the dog's head, then says to her, "Pingu, Mectro." They have a brief staring contest, Pingu reluctant to leave the humans, before James snaps his fingers and points to the sofa. As Pingu trudges off, James becomes very interested in the frayed cuffs of his hoodie, tugging at loose threads with his good hand.

"Hey," Steve says, poking James with his bare foot. James ignores him, so Steve pokes him again. "Hey, look at me."

James finally looks up, pale, worried eyes behind a curtain of dark hair.

Steve grins at him. "It was kind of hot, actually."

The expression on James' face is priceless. Well, expression would suggest James had any idea what to do with his face.

"I, uh... this body," Steve says, indicating Dr Erskine's miracle. "You have no idea how much I worry about accidentally breaking someone if we were to, um...."

"...fuck," James says.

"Yeah," Steve replies.

The beginning of a smile creeps across James' mouth, and he shakes his head in amazement.

"Well," he breathes, tucking some of his hair behind an ear. "You won't break me."

"You're doing such a good job of it by yourself, anyway," says Steve, glancing down at James' bandages.

That gets him a kick back from James, and yeah, that's almost a real smile now. But then it vanishes as James' brows furrow in confusion, and Steve almost wants to cry out. "Your clothes are all wet," James says.

"Yeah. I was out getting our burgers." Steve makes a vague gesture towards the ceiling. "Still raining."

"Hm," James grunts. "I know you won't get a cold, but you should get out of those clothes anyway."

Steve bats his eyelashes at James. "Why Mr. Barnes, are you trying to seduce me?" he says, pitching his voice high.

It's enough to get that big cocky grin on James' face again, and damn if that isn't the best sight in the world. "I've been trying for about three weeks, idiot," James says, his voice rough and sexy. He reaches out to Steve. "Now help me back up into bed."

Steve is more than happy to comply.

Whatever it is about James that's twingeing at the edges of his subconscious, it can wait.

\* \* \*

The old man sits in the SHIELD interrogation room, hands crossed over an old file. Its green cover was sun-faded to a murky yellow; its red stripe designating *top secret* lightened to orange-pink. The man is owlish, in an old suit but with sharp, round eyes, gleaming from deep within dark circles and heavy brows. While he isn't tall, he is bulky, the barrell-chested heft of a person who gave little attention to exercise but much to heavy food. A surprisingly weak chin and wisps of slicked-back grey hair cap off his appearance with a feeling of sibilant strength, of a man who was at the same time a bully and a conformist. He seems relaxed in the interrogation room, the relaxed look of the permanently guilty. (Innocent men tend to fidget in interrogation, raking through their memories as to why they deserve this. A guilty man sits calm, some part of him pleased at last to be where he belongs.) Every so often he taps thick, blunt thumbs against the file. Dum-dum. Da-dum.

Nick Fury glances in through the observation window. "Who's the Ivan?" he asks.

His number two, Phil Coulson, smiles, and pretends he hadn't left an entire briefing file on Director Fury's desk four days ago. Just as Fury will pretend he hasn't read it, so he can see what information Coulson will emphasise, and what he will leave out. "Russian scientist. Defected about 10 years ago when I was on Shield's Eastern Europe desk. Contacted us last week, says he has new information."

"For which he wants to be paid," Fury says, clasping his hands behind his back. It's a problem, these old defectors. They came over around or just after the fall of the Soviet Union, when every defection was still touted as a major ideological victory, and defectors were treated like rock stars and paid handsomely.... for the first year.

Then once all the debriefs were over, they had to adjust to being anonymous citizens with very small incomes and no friends, in a culture that was, for all its ubiquity in movies and television, eminently foreign for them to live in. So they pop up every so often, hassling their old CIA and SHIELD contacts, claiming a new revelation, a remembered detail. None of it ever amounts to a hill of beans. And then there are the ones that just start lying.

"Naturally he wants money," Coulson says. "Quite a lot."

Fury sighs, and turns his good eye on Coulson. "You know the guy. Your gut say he's legitimate? Or is he doing a Golitsyn?"

"Director Fury," Coulson replies, his expression direct and unwavering. "If what Karpov says is true, then we have an enormous opportunity. Possibly the biggest one since Captain Rogers came

out of the ice.”

Fury raises an eyebrow.

“The Soviet Union's last and greatest weapon. He helped create it. And he knows where it is.”

“And he's only telling us now?” Fury says, his voice rising with annoyance.

“It's only surfaced recently. It was thought destroyed,” Coulson says.

Then he glances down at his neatly clasped hands. "What concerns me, however, is who it's currently pointing at."

## Chapter End Notes

### [Chapter title song](#)

Double update this week, due to an unplanned day of having to sit around at home while workmen fix things. This was supposed to be a fluffy chapter but I think it may have also ended up quite angsty and tense. Oops. Apparently I'm unable to write anything without a thriller subplot.

As usual, if you see this fic recced anywhere, let me know. Speaking of which, [here is a super cool mood board someone made on tumblr for this fic!](#)

Next chapter: Lots of sex. (It was supposed to happen in this chapter but how did this become 8500 words HOWWWWWW)

GOMER = Get Out of My Emergency Room. People who don't need to be in hospital, but are. Triage in the US is generally Categories 1-5, with 1 being near death to 5 being a mild injury. Cat 6 doesn't exist but is used to mean people who have nothing wrong with them.

Your regularly scheduled bike porn: a particularly lovely Moto Guzzi.





# Partition

## Chapter Summary

Now is the time for all good boys to go to bed.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The thing known as James Barnes has seen and done a terrible amount of things in his 29 years of life. He's even died, twice. There is very little that can leave him speechless. But the man getting undressed in front of him right now?

Yeah.

*Yeah.*

Steve Rogers, of the blue-green eyes and impossible face and kind heart, is in James' bedroom and is taking his clothes off to the percussive rumble of a late-summer monsoon washing over Brooklyn. He takes the hem of his wet cotton t-shirt, stuck to every muscle, straining across his pecs and shoulders, and pulls it up, peeling it off slowly.

Then Steve blushes and ducks his head, turning around, showing James his back as he slips out of his sodden khakis. *Like that's any help, Rogers*, James thinks, staring at Steve's perfect ass from his perch on the side of the bed, good hand drifting down towards the erection stirring in his own sweatpants.

James is Giddy. Elated. *Terrified*. He wants to take Steve to bed and let everything pour out of him, everything he's hidden, every part of what he is. In gratitude for Steve wanting him. In some hope that Steve will appreciate the great cosmic irony of their coming together. In anticipation of a day when he never has to lie or hide again. A day which he was resigned to never being allowed to have... but Steve, if anyone, would understand.

He doesn't even trust himself to speak. Once he starts confessing, he may never stop. It would be so simple, instead, to *show* Steve, except--

"Hey," Steve says, in nothing but a pair of navy-blue boxer briefs, the thick swell of his cock already straining at the fabric. He steps between James' spread legs, stroking along his jaw with his fingertips. "You okay? You were a million miles away, all of a sudden."

James blushes, shyly. "Sorry." He lifts his left arm, showing off the heavily-wrapped long-arm splint, one of several souvenirs from his racing crash a few days earlier. "Just wishing I wasn't so broken. Not... not going to be very good for you."

Steve looks down at James, this sad, shy, beautiful, *dangerous* creature who wants to sleep with him. And he shakes his head in amazement. How did he get so lucky?

“What?” James asks, worry flickering across his face.

And Steve can't stop himself. He plunges both his hands into James' soft, dark hair and drags him into a long, sweet kiss. James arches his head back and returns the kiss, moaning slightly and pushing up into Steve's lips. Steve shuts his eyes and lets the heat of their mouths and the sound of the rain become his world. The motion of James' lips, soft and red, against his; the feel of their tongues as they touch and explore. He can feel his cock thickening into hardness; his nipples becoming erect and ultrasensitive.

Then, without warning, James strokes along his chest with the fingers of his good hand, and gently pinches one of those over-sensitive nipples. Steve bucks, and almost screams into James' mouth.

Steve breaks the kiss, and stares down at James, lust filling his eyes. “I'm going to take care of you tonight,” he says, his voice thick with desire. James looks like he's going to say something, going to object, but Steve puts a finger in front of those bowed, kiss-bitten lips and says, “I want to. Let me take care of you.”

James nods, his pupils blowing dark.

“Next time,” Steve says, bending down to trail love bites down that long neck, “You can do whatever you want with me. But tonight, it's going to be all about you.”

James nods again. He's panting; his eyes are shut and his good hand is fisting the bedsheets. His legs are still spread wide open, and Steve can see an impressive erection pushing up his sweatpants. *Knew he'd be big*, Steve thought, as his mouth went dry. God, he wanted that cock in his mouth.

“You're wearing too many clothes,” Steve mumbles, as he peels his own boxers down over his straining cock, then drops to his knees and starts nipping and kissing his way down James' perfect, hard body. He stops as James fumbles with his hoodie, slipping his good arm out then easing the splinted arm through. As soon as the hoodie is history, Steve hooks his fingers into the waistband of James' sweatpants and lifts his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Yes,” James breathes.

Steve eases them off, and most of his attention is taken up by the need to get the sweatpants over and past the femoral brace on his left leg so he doesn't notice until he chucks the sweatpants into a corner and looks back up--

That

James isn't wearing any underwear.

And

He is completely shaved.

*Fuck.*

Steve feels a wave of dizziness go through him, as if he's going to faint. He can't stop staring. It's the most erotic thing he thinks he's ever seen. All that smooth skin and dusky balls, then this hard, thick, long cock rising up, dark and wet with precome. He glances up at James, who is tilting his head and biting his lower lip and *that's not helping with the dizziness either*.

Steve lets out a moan that's frankly pornographic, puts his hands on James' thighs, and brushes his lips along the bare skin next to James' cock, and then down across his shaved balls, making little kitten licks with his tongue until he can't resist it any more and he takes James' balls in his hot mouth, gently rolling them on his tongue. James growls and shudders beneath him. And Steve, sometime soon, will spend all day slowly worshipping James' body, kissing and licking every inch of him, but his whole body is pounding with primal need and tonight, he is not going to go slowly. At least, not the first round.

He runs the side of his nose up the side of James' cock and James moans the most filthy-sounding things in Russian. The sounds go straight to Steve's already painfully hard, leaking dick and Steve is forced to take one hand off James and just grip himself, give himself some friction.

James is looking down at him with almost the same feral blankness he had when Steve startled him. His muscles are taut, like a jaguar ready to pounce, and Steve thinks that rationally, this shouldn't be as hot as it is but *fuck*, this is giving him dirty fantasies. He strokes himself a couple times and drags his eyes down from James' face back southwards.

James' cock is wet with precome, dripping with it. It looks *delicious*. Steve bends down and licks those pearls off it with a long, swirling sweep of his tongue, enjoying the way it makes James' cock twitch with need and immediately begin leaking again. He's dimly aware of James *growling*, and then a hand is fisted in his hair and guiding his head and mouth towards--

Steve licks his lips and wraps them around James' cock, taking him in slowly, so slowly, but sucking hard and opening the back of his throat as inch by inch, he doesn't quit, he doesn't stop. James' breathing is ragged, and the hand in his hair gentles and strokes down to the back of his neck. As Steve bottoms out, lips around the base of James' cock, he can feel how the other man is having to hold himself back from fucking up into Steve's mouth. James lets out a low, rough, "*fuck, Steve.*"

Steve looks up through his lashes at the man above him. James' eyes are heavy-lidded, his cheeks pink with arousal. He looks completely sex-wrecked and blissed out. That face over that cut, muscular torso, *God*, Steve groans at the sight, his mouth still stretched around James' dick. The sound, the feeling moving up through his cock makes James gasp and bite his lip. He traces Steve's jaw with his hand as they stare into each other's eyes, pale ice-blue to warm blue-green, and then Steve slowly begins to bob his head over James' cock.

James arches back and all but screams. Steve continues sucking him, coming nearly all the way off his cock, stroking hard with the flat and tip of his tongue up the length and around the head, pushing into his slit, then sinking all the way back down again. But while James is arching back...

Steve slips his hands under James' ass on the bed and lifts him, changing the angle of his pelvis, and with no warning comes off his cock, licking a long stripe down his perineum and then circling his tight, pink hole.

James moans something in Russian but given the way he's trying to push down on Steve's tongue it has to mean *yes*. And at this moment, Steve would give James anything. He kisses the tight ring of muscle then eases his tongue into it. James growls more things in Russian as Steve tongue-fucks him and Steve pulls off, smiling. "Hey, gorgeous. Speak English."

James looks down at him, completely wrecked. "You're... you're the first guy I've fucked in English," he says, breathless. "Foreign languages are.. surprisingly hard at times like this."

Steve grins. "Not as hard as you," he says, and dives back down onto James' cock.

James barks out a laugh, and manages to get out a "Rogers, that's terrible--" before choking off into moans as Steve sucks him down.

Steve feels James' balls begin to tighten and he pulls off, grabbing the base of James' cock to keep him from coming and James makes the most pornographic sound, half-growl and half-moan, hair falling in front of his face, panting to keep any semblance of composure. Steve is having to do the same thing to himself because the sight of James does things to him anyways, but James out of breath and near orgasm? Looking at that is almost a religious experience.

He can only imagine how he looks, lips flushed and wet from being stretched around James' dick, chin wet with saliva and precome. He knows he's blushing and he doesn't care. He wipes his mouth on the back of his arm and then brings his hands up to frame James' ribs, just over where the compression bandages stop. "I forgot to ask," Steve says, and he realises how breathless he is himself as he tries to form words. "Do you, uh... which way do you usually..."

James pulls him up into a searing kiss, and the angle presses their hard, leaking cocks both into each other and against their abs and the feeling is *amazing*, hell, they've barely even done anything yet and Steve is already pretty sure that this is the best sex of his life so far. He can't explain it, can't rationalise it. It's like their blood sings out to each other, like every touch sets off a chemical reaction of pure ecstasy. He wonders if he's even going to be able to survive a fully-healed James bringing his A game, or whether he'll end up a limp, fucked-out sex puppet, unable to do anything ever again.

James is smiling against his lips. He whispers into Steve's mouth, "I switch. Never could pick a side." He licks into Steve's mouth. "Depends on my mood, and the person."

Steve shudders, painfully close to coming just from the feel of James' cock against his, James' muscular abs pressing into him. "G-good," he manages to choke out, thickly. "Me too." He trails a hand down James' chest, rolling a nipple between his fingertips on the way past because it causes James to make *that sound*, that low, rumbling moan, and then he goes down further, hand ghosting over the compression bandages, to the soft, shaved skin below, around James' throbbingly hard cock and tight balls, and back towards his hole. And Steve loses all semblance of chill at the heated look James gives him. Now it's his turn to growl. "I want to fuck you," he says, voice rough with desire, as his fingers press at James' hole.

James' body shakes, like he's just been shot through with a bolt of electricity, and he drops his head down onto Steve's shoulder and bites. "Yes," he says, his lips soothing the area where his teeth just were.

But then Steve realises that it's not what he wants at all. "No," he says, pulling back slightly.

James' expression is confused; hurt.

“No,” Steve says, kissing his way along James' jaw, up to his strong, Slavic cheekbones. “I'm going to make love to you.” Because, Steve realises, as he straddles James and gently lifts him so he's lying all the way on the bed, and checks to make sure that his splinted limbs are at comfortable angles, that's what it is. This sense of the other person being a sun into which he's constantly falling, whose very presence burns him up, it's *love*. And he doesn't need to say the words, they are beyond words now, and the way James is looking up at him in dazed adoration is all the answer he needs.

“Um...?” Steve says.

James points to the nightstand next to the bed. Steve leans across and grabs a few extra pillows and then pulls the drawer open.

“Careful,” James says. “There's--”

...A Glock 19, two knives, a cheap sci-fi paperback, some hair ties, and half a bottle of lube. Steve fishes the lube out, then takes the pillows and puts them under James' hips. And then he just has to kiss James again, because he's leaning over him, and James has his lips parted, and really any excuse, because kissing James is the best thing in the world and he wants never to stop.

He manipulates the lube bottle one-handed, bracing his other hand on the bed next to James' neck, and soon he is slowly inserting one of his large, thick fingers into James. James moans so sweetly into his mouth, pushing down on the finger, wanting more, and Steve is leaning down over him and the tips of their dripping, incredibly overstimulated cocks keep rubbing up against each other's stomachs and it's almost more than Steve could handle, he could come from this alone, but also if he doesn't get inside James soon he think he really might just die.

James takes his fingers so sweetly, looking up at him in such wonder and desire, that Steve is the one left moaning as he scissors two fingers in the hot tightness of James' body, searching for that round nub of muscle and gland that will send James off into ecstasy.

“More,” James says, pushing down onto him. “One more, then you.”

Steve slots in a third finger and hooks them, brushing James' prostate, and James bucks and whimpers up against him, fucking down hard to bury Steve's fingers in him up to his knuckles. Steve looks down, at the sight of his fingers in James, at the arch of his body and his throbbingly hard cock and the way precome has dripped down over all that shaved skin and balls and he's still not over the shaving *at all*--

Steve just has to hold himself for a moment, get his composure back. They rest, forehead to forehead, just being so incredibly close and connected. Steve looks down into James' eyes and the man nods, ever so slightly, and so Steve gently pulls his fingers out and slicks himself up. The stimulation of even the lube on his cock is almost too much; he has no idea if he's going to even make it all the way inside James at this rate. He lines himself up and begins.

James is so tight. *So tight.*

And so hot and... the expression of sheer want and ecstasy on his face... He can't-- He stops, choking off the orgasm that is desperate to unspool within him. He tells himself it's okay, it's not as if he takes any time at all to get hard again, but still, he doesn't want to come until he is all the way in James. A minute longer and he's regained some semblance of control, and he pushes slowly in another inch. James' cock looks painfully hard, leaking a steady stream of precome, and Steve's hand itches to wrap around its thickness but if James comes now, Steve won't be able to hold back either.

He tears his face away from James' body and looks him in the eyes again, bracing his hands on either side of James' head, and slowly, slowly pushing into him. James looks right back at him, *into* him, and Steve can see every fleck of blue and silver in James' eyes, and it's all too much, the tidal wave of stimulation from their physical connection on top of the profound emotional connection Steve is feeling, and as he bottoms out in James he feels like he is coming apart on so many levels, that something deep inside of him had shifted and changed, and nothing would ever be the same.

"Please," James says, and Steve can tell he feels it too. Steve begins rolling his hips, slowly, because anything more is too much, and he leans down to claim James' mouth. And Steve is a current, a live wire, pulsing electric between these two hot, wet points of connection, and he begins to roll his hips faster. He shifts his angle slightly, sliding a hand under James' hips, and on his next roll he can tell he hits James' prostate because James arcs up, electric himself, and cries out, eyes slamming shut as every muscle in his body tenses. He starts to moan something in Russian but catches himself and says, "Steve, I'm so close, I can't--"

And Steve buries his face into that long, arched neck and says, "It's okay, me too, I've got you, James, I've got you," *I love you, I love you--*

He rolls his hips three more times, hard, pushing into James' prostate each time, biting into his neck with his mouth, and he feels James begin to shake and then James grabs him by the hair and lifts his head up to look into his eyes again and James *comes*, shatteringly hard, Steve can feel the hot come spurting onto his chest and the almost crippling pressure on his cock as all of James' muscles tense and James is looking into his eyes as his orgasm washes over him and it's more than Steve can stand, he comes too, and James wraps his good leg around Steve's back and takes over, riding down hard on Steve's cock as Steve's orgasm pulses through him and it's *so good* and *so much* and Steve screams.

And it doesn't end. He's still coming, the orgasm still shuddering through him and he's reduced to just bracing himself over James, biting his lip, eyes nearly closed as the waves of pleasure keep hitting him. James reaches a hand up to stroke his face, and Steve can tell by the way that James continues to twitch and shiver, how he continues to feel hot come against his stomach, that he's getting powerful aftershocks too.

And then they're done, dazed and sticky and looking at each other in wonder as the rain continues to thunder down on the roof. Steve doesn't want to pull out. Doesn't want the connection to end. He carefully lifts James' right leg over him and rolls James onto his side, and then lies down next to him, behind him and still inside him, and curls up into the other man's back. He throws his arm over James.

James takes his hand in his and kisses the palm, then bites and kisses the pads of all the fingers that had been inside him, and then finishes off by brushing his lips over Steve's knuckles.

"You okay like that?" mumbles Steve, utterly spent and so content, but worried that James may not be comfortable lying on the side where he clearly took the worst damage from his motorcycle crash.

“Mm-hm,” James says, and tries to wiggle in a little closer to Steve. Steve leans in to kiss the soft baby hairs on the back of James' neck, sticky with sweat from their lovemaking. Unfortunately the small motion makes Steve's soft cock come out of James, and Steve hums in disappointment.

James sighs and rolls onto his back, smiling and satisfied as he looks over at Steve. Then he reaches out and pulls Steve in to a slow, lazy kiss, almost chaste, just lips moving against each other and the smallest, gentlest swipes of tongue.

Now it's Steve's stomach's turn to growl.

“Mm, did you get burgers, or did I dream that?” James says, smirking.

“I did. You want to get up and eat them?”

James shakes his head, locks of long dark hair falling over his face. “Nooo. Bed picnic. Not like we need to save the sheets.”

Yeah. The sheets are pretty much of a write-off, Steve thinks. He kisses James on the mouth, then bends down and nuzzles his soft cock before kissing that as well, and mouthing, “your wish is my command.”

And damn, if that doesn't make James' cock thicken, and twitch against his lips.

Christ, could James be any more perfect for him. Though he'd never discuss it, Steve had a number of phobias about sex. The most obvious one was just... losing control and breaking people, grabbing on too hard. A more subtle one but no less crippling was the way the serum had enhanced him. Not only was he a lot bigger than most people were used to, he had almost no refractory period.

The few times he'd experimented with his new body, he'd ended up hurting someone, or making them feel weird and guilty when his body was ready for rounds three and four (or in one case, even round two) and his partner was clearly done and unable to get aroused again. Even the USO chorus girls, the ones that had taught him how to give a blowjob, hadn't been able to keep up. Worse were the partners he gave in to, the ones who wanted to sleep with *Captain America*, and he had said yes because some nights he needed to remember that his hands could be used for something other than to injure. And he would look at their keen faces, faces that regarded him as an exciting object to collect, and he'd not be able to get it up at all.

Then there was James. Steve licked his lips and traced them softly over the silky skin of James' cock, already fattening again and hardening under him, and then down to James' balls. How the skin felt, with no hair on it, the dusky pebbled softness.

“James,” Steve whispered, licking a stripe up the valley of velvety bare flesh between the base of James' cock and his inner thigh. “I want you to shave me.”

James whimpers, and blood surges to his cock, filling it. He reaches a hand down and circles himself, starting a slow, lazy stroke. “Fuck, Steve,” he growls. “Don't...” He bites off a moan. “Later. When I can use my left hand again. Now?” He playfully pushes Steve's face away and fixes him with a glare. “Feed me.”

And with that, Steve's cock wakes up and starts thickening again, because there's one thing he really wants to feed James right now.

“You're right,” Steve sighs, leaning back onto his heels. “We can't just stay in bed and fuck all night.”

“We can and we will,” James says, voice rough. “But first we're going to have dinner.”

\* \* \*

The burgers are just as good cold.

Pingu jumps up on the bed and lies at the bottom, giving them the world's most pitiful look, as if instead of a chunky black pup shining with health she is but a poor, starving street dog on her last breath.

“Don't fall for it,” James says, around a mouthful of fries, as Steve breaks off a piece of his burger. “Also if you give her that, she'll fart all night and I'll hold you responsible.” Then he grins, leans forwards, and bites the piece of burger out of Steve's fingers.

Steve steals James' second milkshake in retaliation.

He's met with a glare so fierce that it sends hot fire curling up into his stomach. “You're very lucky I can't fight back properly, or this would be war,” James growls, narrowing his eyes at Steve.

The rain is still pattering down, and as Steve takes a long slurp of the milkshake (vanilla; delicious) he says, “It's going to flood, isn't it?”

James nods. “We should be okay. But further down King Street, towards Conover, it's going to be a mess.”

“Feels like the whole world is washing away.”

“Yeah. It does,” says James, leaning against him.

Steve gazes up at the patterns the rain is making on the skylights, and James snatches back his milkshake.

\* \* \*

Steve has thrown away all the burger wrappers and trash, and escorted a deeply unwilling Pingu downstairs to do business outside in the alley, when he notices a black Sharpie pen on the workshop counter. He picks it up and he and Pingu go back upstairs: Pingu to her crate, Steve to bed.

In bed, he and James are both comfortable, slow and lazy from good food and great sex. James is sitting up against the headboard, legs splayed out.

Steve sits cross-legged, facing James, and takes his left hand, gently. He looks at the silver-and-black robot-arm tattoo that ends shortly beyond where the splint stops. He's searching for something specific, and after a moment, he finds it. He places his thumb on the ghost of one of James' old *bratva* tattoos, from when he was Aleksander Lukin's gangland executioner. The tattoo is utterly simple, a single dot in a circle. The mark of an orphan, alone in the world.



He takes the cap off the pen with his teeth, and leans down over the tattoo.

“What are you doing?” James asks.

Steve adds a second dot inside the circle. “Darcy,” he explains. Then a third dot. “Me.” A fourth. “Pingu.” He looks up. “How many brothers?”

James smiles. “Five. Piotr, Vanya, Dima, Nikolai, and Arseny.”

Steve pouts slightly. “Gonna need a bigger circle, orphan boy.” But he adds dots anyway, on the circle, outside of it. One for each brother. “Anyone else?”

James shakes his head. His eyes are wet, gleaming with unshed tears.

“You miss them?”

“Yeah. Every day,” James says, his voice soft and broken.

“Mine were Gabe, Jim, Monty, Denier, Dum Dum, and Izzy.” Steve sighs. “I miss 'em too. They're all dead now. Old age, mostly. *Luckily*.”

James beckons for the pen and Steve hands it over. James takes it and then takes Steve by the wrist, turning his arm over so his palm and forearm are facing up. He draws a big, messy circle on Steve's arm, then six dots inside it. “Your old brothers,” he says. Then he counts something off on his fingers, whispering to himself in Russian. Another dot, the seventh. “Stark.” An eighth. “Romanova.” Nine. “The sniper with the bow--”

“Barton.”

“He shot at me in Aleppo. Maybe don't remind him,” James flashes a cocky smirk at Steve.

“He missed?” says Steve, amazed.

“No. He didn't miss. But he didn't hit, either,” James says. “Long story. For another time.” He adds a tenth dot. “The Falcon.” More follow, until they've run through all of the Avengers and the large circle on Steve's arm is filled with dots.

“Anyone else?”

Steve nods. “Peggy Carter. And my mom.” Two more dots. James bends down and brushes his lips across them all, and murmurs, “so many people who love you.” Then he looks up at Steve. “You deserve them all. And hundreds more.”

Then Steve takes the pen in his other hand and adds two dots so close together, their edges touch.

“Who is that for?” James asks. “It's... double?”

“For you.” Steve bites his lip, then dares a glance into those pale eyes, his heart catching in his throat. “James... why did you choose that name? Don't... don't lie.”

Something flickers behind James' eyes, and it takes Steve a moment to realise it's sheer terror. He ducks his head and draws away from Steve, letting a curtain of hair fall across his face. “Then I can't answer you. Not yet,” he mutters.

Steve caps the pen and tosses it aside. He frames his hands around James' angular face and gently brings it back around to him. “James. You're hiding something from me. Please. You can tell me

anything and I'll still--"

*love you*

"-- want to be with you. Please tell me the truth."

James shakes his head, closing his eyes and seeming to curl in on himself. "Please, no. I can't. I'm... I'm not ready."

And Steve realises he's losing James, that he's retreating into himself, and he can't let that happen. He sweeps James into his arms and tucks James' head against his bare chest, stroking his hair like a cat. "It's okay. Ssh. I didn't mean to pressure you." He drops a kiss onto the top of James' head, into that silky dark hair. "You don't ever have to tell me. I love you exactly as you are right now--"

Then Steve's brain catches up with what his mouth was saying and he slams his mouth shut, alarm and adrenaline running through his body. But a truth has been released into the world, perhaps not the one that Steve was looking for, but a truth nonetheless. And once out, it can never be returned. Steve relaxes. It only hurts the first time. "I love you," he whispers into James' hair. He holds James tighter. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

James moves restlessly in his arms, and pushes out of them so he can look at Steve. There is amazement in his eyes, and love, and so much sadness and loneliness. The tears that had threatened earlier are spilling now, trailing down his cheeks. James pushes hungrily into Steve's mouth, and it's like heaven, and the fire that Steve knew was always smouldering between them blazes hot and bright and Steve falls into the flames willingly and lets himself burn.

For all the slow, sizzling passion of their first time, the second time is fast, rough and needy. James slicks up his good hand and grabs both their cocks together, stroking them hard, a punishing, brutal pace that leaves Steve gasping in ecstasy into James' mouth.

He is close to the edge soon, too fast, and he pushes James' hand away. James brings it back almost immediately, but around his ass rather than his cock, and *hauls* Steve up the bed until he's close enough that James can wrap his lips around Steve's cock.

Steve shouts and his entire body convulses, and before he can stop himself, he snaps his hips, fucking into the white heat of James' mouth. Those cheeks, hollowed out around his cock, it's almost more than he can stand to look at.... he stops himself, breathing hard. "Sorry," he chokes out thickly.

James hums. Which doesn't help the whole self-control thing at all, as the vibrations around his cock are unbelievably erotic. He pulls off, and grins up at Steve. "Steve," he says, breathy and rough, "I want you to fuck my mouth."

Steve gulps.

"But," James says, as a wicked smirk spreads across his face... and Steve wonders what he's going to say when suddenly there's one of those long, artistic fingers pressing at his hole, cool with lube and hot with promise.

James quirks an eyebrow at him and smiles that cocky grin and Steve is going to fuck it right off his face. He grabs James' jaw and forces his thumb between James' lips, working his mouth open.

He has a brief moment of terror, whether this is okay, and then James moans around his thumb and sucks on it, looking up at him through those dark lashes with savage innocence and no, that's it, it's *on*.

Steve feeds James his cock as James reaches around and toys with Steve's hole, circling it, teasing. On the first snap of Steve's hips, James moans and hums again. On the second, he takes Steve down to the root, his throat clutching and gagging a couple times around Steve's head and and it shouldn't feel so good but it does.

Then James breaches the stiff rim of muscle around Steve's hole and sinks his index finger up to the second joint. Steve's body bucks forwards and James sucks him, messy and wet and saliva and precome pouring down his jaw and Steve can't even look at it because it's so fucking *sexy* he's going to blow his top like a 15 year old boy-- *he can control this, he can control himself--*

James twists his finger and as Steve pulls back for another thrust into that delicious mouth he rams that finger up into Steve all the way to his knuckle, rubbing hard against Steve's prostate and Steve is tumbling down the rabbit hole, thundering down the rollercoaster, snapping his hips ragged and messy into James' mouth and he can't warn James he's about to come because that would involve being able to form words and right now all he's reduced to is loud, rough noises of pleasure and he's about to ram his cock down James' throat when instead he has a better idea, sees what he really wants, it's right below him, and it's even already covered in lube thanks to James' earlier jerking them both off.

He pulls out of James' mouth and shoves James' hand out of him. Then he grabs James' cock and doesn't even bother to line it up very well, he doesn't care if it hurts, the pain is part of the pleasure, and he rocks back from his knees and stabs himself down on James' thick cock, all the way to the hilt, in one go.

And Christ he's *so full* and it's *so good* and he has *missed* this. James' head is thrown back and all of him is shaking at the unexpected and overwhelming pleasure, and Steve rocks up and rams himself down on James' cock a couple more times and fists his own cock until he's coming all over James' chest, all over that long, powerful neck, and James rams up one last time and hits his prostate and it's *too much*, and Steve shouts his surprise and his pleasure, and James is coming too, grabbing Steve's hip so hard it's going to leave a hand-shaped bruise.

Both of them are beyond words, shaking into each other, shaking together, and the rain continues to fall.

\* \* \*

The next morning, waking up lazy and sore in his lover's arms, Steve calls Pepper, expecting to get her voicemail, but she picks up.

"Morning, Pep. Did I wake you?" Steve asks, suddenly concerned that Pepper might be in Malibu and thus on West Coast time.

"No, I'm in London, been up for hours. Work thing. Utterly tedious. What can I do for you, Steve?"

Steve stretches, and James mumbles beside him, lazily biting his shoulder. "I, uh. I need New York

restaurant advice. I want to take someone out to, to a really nice place, somewhere like Tony likes, with, with wait lists and stuff.”

“Someone?” Pepper says, curiosity in her voice. “Like a *date* someone?”

“Yes,” Steve says, exhaling. “Like my boyfriend someone.” Steve doesn't need to see the smile that spreads across James' face; he can feel it against his shoulder.

“Oh,” Pepper says, expertly masking any surprise she may have had, and at that moment Steve realises that Tony hasn't told her, which means he hasn't told anyone. Which... Tony never ceases to surprise him.

“I'm coming out, Pep. I'm not going to make a statement or do interviews, but I also don't want to hide my relationship with James.”

“Okay,” Pepper says, and in the background there's the *chink* of a teacup being replaced on its saucer. “When do you want to go on this date?”

Steve covers the phone and looks down at James. “Friday?” James mumbles. “Splints should come off on Wednesday.”

“I will make you two a reservation somewhere breathlessly exclusive and full of cameras for Friday. And, hello, James, I look forwards to meeting you.”

“Hello, elegant-sounding lady,” James murmurs, low and husky with sleep.

Pepper's laugh tinkles forth like a bell. “Oh, we're going to have to watch out for *you*, aren't we,” Pepper says, her voice dry with amusement. Then, “Steve, I need the bare basics. Full name, how the two of you met, and if there's anything in James' past that the press will use against him.”

Steve looks at James, who nods, and whispers, “all of it.”

“Got a pen, Pep?” Steve asks.

“Always.”

“Okay. His name is James Buchanan Barnes, we met when he fixed my bike, and he's a current top-ranked motorcycle racer and former Russian mafia hitman.”

“Ha, ha, very funny, Steve.”

Then Pepper pauses. “You're... you're serious, aren't you?” There's a sigh, and rustling, as Pepper composes herself. “Steve, maybe we should think about this, discuss it, before going public--”

“I've thought about it, Pepper,” Steve says, his voice firm. “I think about things a lot more than any of you give me credit for.”

“Okay,” Pepper groans, “But you're paying for the entire Avengers PR team to go on holiday in Hawaii once this is over, because believe me, they're going to have earned it.” She drums her fingers on the table. “Is the hitman thing... public?”

“No,” Steve says. “It was under a different name. And that person is assumed dead.”

Pepper hums. “We can work with that,” she says. “This is do-able.”

“Thank you, Pepper,” Steve says.

“You know I love a challenge, Steve,” she smiles. “And Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Congratulations. I'm... I'm really happy for you. You deserve so much happiness. I'm glad you've found someone.”

Steve can't stop smiling when Pepper hangs up. A moment later, his phone buzzes with a text.

PP: Is he hot? I bet he's really hot. Send me a photo.

Steve rolls away and points his phone at James, who is looking especially dishevelled and rakish against the rumpled white sheets, his eyes light in the morning sun. He texts the resulting picture to Pepper.

PP: !!!

PP: 10/10 approved

PP: And fwiw if I was dating that I'd want to show him off to the whole world too

PP: Congratulations again, Steve :D

“What,” James murmurs, pouting, as Steve giggles every time his phone buzzes.

Steve looks up and it still catches in his stomach, that there is this filthy naked angel in bed with him, this perfect blend of naughty and shy and tough and kind. That he gets to have James. Whenever and however he wants.

“Nothing,” he says, tossing the phone onto the floor, because he has more important things to do, like kissing that pout off his boyfriend's face.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the lovers, in a distant city by the sea a photograph is seen, and two phone calls are made. The first is from Odessa to a sleepy village on Long Island Sound: Glen Cove. The second, a short while later, is from Glen Cove to the wild, southern shores of Brooklyn: Brighton Beach.

"Take four brigades," says the man in Glen Cove. "And bring me his head. I want conclusive proof."

Finding volunteers will be no problem, thinks the man in Brighton Beach. It will be a great badge of underworld prestige to be part of the team that kills Winter.

## Chapter End Notes

[Chapter title song](#). If you're not familiar with Beyoncé's Partition, it's NSFW both with visuals and lyrics. Thus THE PERFECT SONG for this.

"I'll just start writing the porny bit," she says. 6000 words later, OOPS, o hai new chapter!

NB: tweaking my pseudos/user names to tie in to me [on Wattpad](#) and also the pseudonym I'm going to use for my novel, so if you see BetteNoire, don't freak out, it's still your li'l ol' wolf.

What book is in James' nightstand? [Well, how about this one](#). Roadside Picnic is another possibility because ah, shit, my love for Stalker knows NO bounds and naysayers gonna have to FIGHT ME.

Glen Cove is a town on the Long Island shore that's very traditionally moneyed Russian, back from when the Soviet embassy used to station all its higher-level workers out there. Brighton Beach is less wealthy immigrant Russian/Ukrainian, mostly Odessan. A nice working-class area, so far untouched by hipsters.

Bike porn: I have a Ducati thing. This is the Ducati Monster. Hey boo:

□

# Gravity Rides Everything

## Chapter Summary

There's a man on the bridge.

*(TW for trauma, urban terrorism/disaster.)*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nick Fury hangs up his phone and motions for Phil Coulson to come into his office. He does not, however, indicate that Coulson can sit. “Good weekend, Phil?”

“Good enough.” Coulson folds his hands behind his back and smiles, mildly. “You've come to a decision, Director?”

“Yeah,” Fury says, pushing the Karpov file across his desk with one of the cheap ball-point pens he favours. “We're going to let this run.”

The wrinkles that appear in Coulson's brow are the only indications of his surprise.

“I mean, surveil the hell out of him, but as long as he remains nonviolent, we let him run.” Fury clicks his pen open on the file. “I'm intrigued. Very.” Click. Closed. Click. Open. “But the situation is... complicated. We need to walk carefully.”

“But--”

“I have no reason to believe he is a current danger to Captain America.” Click. Click.

“The long game it is, then.” Coulson inclines his head. “And if he becomes violent?”

Fury smirks. It's not a warm thing. “Then he hands us the leverage we need. This motherfucker really believes he's gonna be able to keep himself to a quiet life?” He snorts, tucking his pen into a pocket. “When he's literally been built to kill.”

“Indeed, sir.” Coulson's brow is smooth, and a tepid smile spreads across his face. “My thoughts indeed.”

Fury grunts and flicks his fingers, dismissing Coulson. But as the man turns, Fury calls out. “Oh, and Phil?”

“Hmm?” Coulson pauses in the doorway, but doesn't look back.

“Romanoff rates him, so... use someone good to plant the bugs?”

\* \* \*

James leans down to throw the bolt on one of the big wooden shop doors, fitting it into the hole in the pavement that will keep the door open all day, and contemplates just taking the damn leg brace off. At this point it's irritating the living hell out of him, the lack of mobility, the way it throws off his balance.

He stands up to see Darcy coming down the street. Or at least, Darcy's legs (shredded black Daisy Dukes; vintage black cowboy boots with red roses on them). The rest of Darcy is hidden behind a large houseplant, huge green leaves and a terra-cotta pot so heavy she can barely manage it.

James groans and hobbles towards her. "Darcy. What," he grumbles, grabbing the pot out of her arms with his good hand.

Darcy exhales in relief. "Ohmigod. Thank you. That was sooo heavy." Then she rolls her eyes as James carries it easily in one hand back towards the shop. "Ugh. Fine, make me feel like a wimp."

"You *are* a wimp, Darcy," James says, putting the houseplant on the counter. "Here?" he asks.

Darcy frowns. She's wearing an oversize green t-shirt that says STAX on it, and a frayed straw cowboy hat. "Little to the left."

James rolls his eyes and limps into the back of the shop.

"Aren't you going to ask why we have a houseplant?" Darcy calls.

"No," he says.

"Hey! When do the splints come off?" she asks.

"Tomorrow. *Finally*." James' voice is heavy with frustration.

"Dude, you've had them on for like a *week*. When I broke my arm I had to wear a cast for six weeks and it itched like hell. But it was hot pink, so that was kind of cool. But you totally don't get to complain."

There's a crash from the back of the shop and Darcy sighs as she flops into her chair at the counter. "Your daddy is such a drama queen," she whispers to Pingu, who waddles out and stretches and groans in the front of the shop before flopping down in a sunbeam.

Darcy glances up again at the screech of a delivery truck's hydraulic brakes outside. Which is... weird. Deliveries don't usually reach them until after lunch.

She's half out of her chair when Tony Stark swans in, in ratty jeans, an AC/DC t-shirt, and rose-tinted sunglasses.

"Nice shirt," he says, pointing at Darcy as he stops in the middle of the front office and waves towards the door. "C'mon, Steve. Chop-chop."

"Uh--" Darcy says, as Steve wheels in a pile of boxes on a hand-cart. "What the--"

"Bike parts," smiles Tony. "Obviously."

Darcy throws up her hands and goes back to her chair. "He's cranky this morning. It's your funeral, dude."

James appears at the door to the workshop, his glare icy. "What's going on?"



Darcy shrugs in the most theatrical and disapproving way she can manage. “You have surprise Avengers?” Then she mutters as she heads back to her counter, *why can't it be surprise Falcon, he's the hot one.*

Steve smiles to himself and makes a note to follow up on that later.

Tony struts right up into James' space and looks up at him. “Nice casts.”

“Splints,” James grumbles.

“Whatever,” Tony says. “Cap told me the OpenGP committee was giving you shit about not having a sponsor, so I am here to fix that and also give you a hand building a new bike because it can't be easy doing it with just the one.” His expression turns into an excited grin. “Besides, I have *ideas.*”

James does his best to fold his arms, and glares down at Tony.

Tony folds his arms and glares right back. “You gonna be well enough to race in Florida next week, Spooky Eyes? Because you'll have a bike. And a jet. I mean, this whole hobo pickup-truck roadtrip to races thing is cute, but... actually, no, it's just tragic.”

Steve pushes past with the hand-cart. “What else, Tony?”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Everything in the truck needs to come out of the truck, Steve, that's why we put it in the truck.” Then he looks back up at James. “So. Miami. Yes or no?”

“Yes,” James rumbles. “But--”

Tony holds up a finger and cranes his neck around James to see where Steve is, then motions for James to bend down closer. “C'mere, Red Peril.” James sighs and complies. Tony whispers into his ear, “At some later date you and I are gonna have a chat about the insane specs on your bike and how no normal human could actually control it, but until then we're just some friends building stuff together, 'kay?”

Tony lifts an eyebrow at the tension that coils in James' body, with the slight widening of his eyes the only outward signs of his shock. “What? I'm a genius.” Then he wanders in to the workshop as if he owns it. “Steve! The stand by the window. Better light.” He looks back at James. “Coming?”

James grits his jaw and hobbles into his workshop, infested as it currently is by Avengers. He hobbles right past Steve and Tony, not even looking at them, and into the back kitchen to make tea. He needs a moment, and tea, before he can be anywhere near civil. He wants to take Stark's fucking head off. And he has to remind himself, as he hyperventilates in the kitchen, that this is what he *wanted*. He wanted no more lying. No more hiding.

But there is ever a terrifying chasm between *wanting* and *doing*.

“Hey, you okay?” Steve asks from the kitchen doorway.

James nods. He forces himself to slow down his breathing. Busies himself stirring his tea. “Surprised, is all.”

He can feel Steve come closer, feel how the air becomes more electric as the distance between them closes. Steve puts a hand on his lower back and James flinches.

“This was a terrible idea. I knew it was,” Steve sighs, and turns to go back out and yell at Tony.

“No,” James says, circling Steve's forearm with his good hand. “No, it's okay. I... I want this. I'm just not good at it.”

Steve smiles and moves in closer to James, slipping a hand up the side of his neck. James positively *melts* into the touch, his exhale turning into a low, throaty moan. Their lips are on each other a moment later, and it's Steve's turn to moan as James' hand cups his ass possessively. They haven't seen each other since they parted on Sunday afternoon, the unspoken plan to wait until their date on Friday. And though it's been less than 48 hours, Steve feels like he's spent every moment since missing James' body under his hands. He fists a hand in James' long hair, knocking out his ponytail, and *yanks*. James growls and his kiss becomes harder, more urgent, and he's pushing Steve back against the counter and--

“Steve! No distracting my racer,” Tony calls, over the sound of boxes being opened in the other room. “I mean it.”

Steve and James reluctantly push away from each other, both of them breathing heavily. James grins and snatches one last kiss off Steve as he reaches around for his mug of tea, before limping out to join Tony.

Steve leans against the kitchen doorway and watches them, a smile on his face. Once James gets over his weird standoffishness with Tony, the two of them seem to get along fine. Tony had brought over a complete set of parts and components for James' usual racing bike (or as near as Jarvis could tell using photographs), plus a number of options and a few experimental systems he was working on. The parts are all laid out in a semicircle around them, like an exploded view, and every so often one of them would go and pick up a part and they'd argue about it.

The two of them are leaning towards each other at that moment, both waving their hands around, having a really intense conversation about seamless gearboxes (whatever those are). James would lapse into Russian to explain the more complicated engineering concepts, and Tony has his phone out on a spare stool so Jarvis can do simultaneous translation. Steve becomes distracted by the long, muscular line of James' back, in his old blue v-neck tee with the holes (Steve's favourite, he thinks); by the elegant, precise gestures of James' hands. He loses track of the conversation; of how long he watches them.

James finally tosses his good hand up. “Fine. We try it,” he says.

Tony grins, triumphant. “It's going to be so worth it. If we don't take a good five seconds off your fastest time on this course I'll... I dunno. I'll do something public and embarrassing.”

“I see the newspaper. You do public embarrassing things all the time,” James mutters.

Steve shakes his head. The scene makes Steve happy on some deep, fundamental level, just profoundly *content*. Possibly happier than he's ever been before in his life.

Tony's eyes widen. “Hey, what would you say about changing your racing colours? To go with the whole sponsorship thing?”

“No,” James glowers.

“I mean, I was thinking we don't *announce* the sponsorship. You just appear on the start line in Miami with *STARK* across your back and a new bike and everyone else cries like 14-year-old girls outside a One Direction concert, because they realise they're never going to win another race again. And we still don't do interviews, because fuck 'em. But you out there in my red and gold? That would--”

“No.”

“C'moon,” Tony wheedles. “Not that your current Goth look is bad. I mean, the whole tall, black leather thing probably intimidates the shit out of the other racers. But picture this for a moment, okay? Red jumpsuit? Gold stripe down the side? Maybe a gold helmet too, although that might be a liiittle too Daft Punk--”

James feels like he's freezing from the inside out. The vision at the edges of his eyes goes dark, and the wrench in his hand clatters onto the floor.

*Again, soldatik.*

*M'tired. Wanna stop.*

*Machines don't get tired. Again.*

He shakes his head, trying to clear his fuzzed vision. There's a hand on his shoulder-- *Steve*. A voice, concerned, saying his name, over and over. He has to get the fuck under control, now.

Breathe. Focus.

James looks up at Stark, a snarl on his face. “Red. Gold. Soviet colours,” he chokes out. “NO.”

Tony's jaw goes slack as realisation dawns. “Oh, shit. I never thought of that. No. You're right. Hulking Russian in red and gold. Bad look. Bit too *Rocky IV*.”

Steve is rubbing small circles on his back with his big hand and it helps him. It helps him so much, but at the same time he resents it. He's furious with himself for letting them see him like this, letting them see him *weak*.

They're still staring at James, Tony apologetic, Steve concerned, when the alarm goes off.

“Fuck,” Tony swears. One of the boxes that James had assumed was parts begins to unfold itself, and pieces fly off, attaching themselves to Tony.

*Oh.*

Steve just hisses and heads for the door.

“Sorry, gotta go,” Tony says, his suit almost fully formed around him. He points at James. “Stay away from lower Manhattan for a while, okay?” Then he's off, slipping out the alley door and up into the sky in a bright arc of white light.

\* \* \*

It's Hydra. They're after a Mayan artifact being shipped up to the Met Museum for display. Jarvis works out quickly that the artifact, when combined with several others that Hydra has stolen over the past few months, creates some sort of time-disrupting portal. Which is the last thing a fascist organisation with a hard-on for Hitler really needs.

Steve thinks, as he races towards Lower Manhattan, his shield on his back and uniform on, riding the bike James built him, that six months ago he would have yearned to use that time-disrupting portal to go back, to see the end of the war. Get back to a life he understood. But now? Now, he thinks that he might be okay in the future. That he, Steve Rogers, has a future. Has things he's looking forwards to.

This battle isn't one of them, but he stopped looking forwards to fights a long time ago.

Hydra troops are flying single-person air-sleds, isolating the Brinks van with the artifact on FDR Drive just below the Brooklyn Bridge. Wall Street is right around the corner; the piers and ferries below, and Steve winces. The possibility for civilian chaos is huge, and knowing Hydra, they'll go for that to keep the Avengers occupied.

Today the team is him, Tony, Sam, Vision, and Wanda. Natasha's with Clint, whose broken bones from the Alaska mission are still healing. The Other Guy isn't a good idea in the close-packed area of Lower Manhattan, and Thor is in Asgard. Steve swears under his breath as one of the flying Hydra sleds spots him and starts firing. Clint would be really useful to have right now. And Natasha; she always has his six. It's odd, somehow empty, not having her at his side.

Sam and Tony are up in the air, dogfighting with Hydra sleds. Steve barks into his comm for Vision to guard the artifact and for Wanda to meet him; they'll be on duty clearing civilians--

-the first Hydra bomb goes off.

“Tony, swap places with Vision. I need him scanning for survivors. You don't let them take that truck anywhere--” Steve hauls his bike around to head to the ferry pier, aflame, full of screaming people. “Wanda, contain that fire and keep that pier attached until we can get people on boats. Phil! I need SHIELD teams here, NOW. Tony, if it gets bad take the whole damn truck and drop it in the river. They want the artifact, they can swim for it--”

“Unless they have a submarine, wouldn't put that past these assholes,” says Tony. “Hey, Cap, watch your--”

The second bomb explodes in an office tower next to the FDR and Steve freezes at the sight that makes every New Yorker's stomach clutch in terror, the slow-motion disintegration of a high-rise on a bright, sunny morning. And then he blinks because he's in shadow, and there's a chunk of the 41<sup>st</sup> floor arcing down slowly, tumbling through the air--

\* \* \*

Darcy is hunched over the laptop, scraping the last of the purple metallic polish off her nails with her teeth. The news reports are sporadic, confused, the newscaster's voice often drowned out by sirens or screaming. The volume's up loud enough for James to hear in the other room, and while

she mutters *jesusfuckfuckfucknotagain*, he paces relentlessly.

Then the building falls. Slowly. Almost elegant in its sheer destructive majesty. Crashing down across the FDR, breaking the expressway, and somewhere under it is a navy-blue bike with silver stripes on its fairing--

“He's down! He's down! Captain America is down!” cries the announcer, as chunks of rubble begin to glow red, as the Scarlet Witch diverts her effort from the drowning to save the one foreigner who always saw the good in her--

And James is in the front office and Darcy hadn't even heard him there, he just materialised, and he looks wild, feral, and Darcy gasps--

James stutters, his accent heavy, “If... if you *swore* you'd never do something again... but it could save-- “ His pale eyes are desperate.

“If you can save these people's lives, James, do it,” Darcy says, 9/11 flashing through her mind. “For God's sake, *do it*.”

James is already stripping off his splints, discarding them as he strides into the workshop and up to his apartment.

He comes back a minute later, a backpack slung over his back with a long case sticking out of it, and he grabs the little red Indian Scout out of the window. It roars to life and he slings a leg over. Darcy wonders momentarily how he can move so well, given his injuries, but there are so many other things going on she doesn't really think about it.

James looks at her, his eyes burning with a cold intensity she's never seen in them before. “Don't tell anyone where I've gone,” he says.

“I don't even know—” Darcy starts, but he roars out of the shop and hauls up the street, pushing the street bike for all it's worth.

\* \* \*

Wanda stops the giant piece of building from crushing Steve, but cars around him aren't so lucky. He curses the math, as he dodges the bike towards the worst of the accident. How his life is worth more than that of a family of five from New Jersey, screaming and trying to get out of their sensible van. Cursing how Hydra was using basic human feeling against them, tying the Avengers up with so many casualties they'd have to pull away from defending the stupid goddamn piece of magic rock they wanted.

He gets the family out, or at least four of them. The toddler is dead, crushed into her Disney carseat under the fallen rubble. Next is an Afghan-refugee cab driver, and his fare, a Finnish girl cabbing it in from Newark Airport. The cab driver has a concussion, blood coursing down his face and henna'ed beard; the Finnish girl is all broken up and might not make it. In the distance he can hear sirens, red light, blue light, here they come. Blood on the pavement. For a rock. For a stupid glowing rock.

He hears buzzing high above him and looks up to find a squadron of the Hydra air-sleds arrayed around him. Finally, something he can hit. He unslings his shield and flings, taking down the first

two, their sleds smoking and spiralling towards the pavement. The rest open fire, and he catches the shield and uses it to deflect their blue ray-guns. He waits for an opening--

— a body hits the ground, then another--

— someone is shooting them--

“Sam?!” Steve says into his comm. But the shots aren't from Sam's Uzis; they're neat, long-range sniper shots, center of the head, one bullet each.

“What?! Kinda busy, Cap,” Sam says, the *tap-tap-tap* of gunfire in the background.

An air-sled skews, heading towards the fleeing civilians, its pilot slumped dead over the wheel. Steve flings his shield, knocking it so it spirals off into the East River.

“Who's shooting?” Steve asks. “I need a sitrep, now!”

Vision's artificially perfect voice echoes through the comm. “Wanda and I are still managing the rescue of survivors from the Water Street high-rise. Sam is defending the pier and SHIELD are manning the ferries, getting civilians out. Mr Stark has control of the artifact.”

“Gonna fly it straight to the Tower, let these fuckers catch me if they can--”

“Careful, Tony--” Steve says. He whirls as he hears another airsled approach, and is about to release his shield when the front of the driver's head explodes in a puff of pink blood and brains, the exit wound of a high-velocity sniper round and *who is shooting--*

He pushes the thought out of his mind. He pushes the fear that he knows the answer out of his mind, and he focuses on solving the problem at hand. “Tony, yes. Get it out of here. If they follow you to the Tower, grab Bruce and get to a field somewhere and we'll let the Other Guy swat 'em. I don't want Hydra targeting midtown next. Sam, you get Tony's six.”

“Roger that,” Sam says, and out of the corner of his eye Steve sees the red, gold and white of Tony's suit streak by, followed by Sam and a shitload of airborne Hydra goons. Tony is cradling an aluminum suitcase in one arm, which must contain the artifact.

Steve is brought back to his immediate surroundings when he hears a creak, of breaking metal, and he runs over to an SUV dangling half-off the huge break in the raised expressway. Slings the shield onto his back and sends a silent prayer to whoever is shooting--

--*James*--

--that he can keep Hydra off his back for long enough. There's a young black woman behind the wheel of the SUV and she's crying, hugging herself. Steve grabs the bumper of the SUV and pulls. Its undercarriage screeches over the pavement, sparking, not coming, every muscle in his arms and back is burning, and the vehicle inches forwards-- a blast of blue zings next to his shoulder and Steve nearly lets go. The young woman screams as the car lurches, and Steve yells, “I have you, get out! Get out!” and she reaches into the back seat and grabs her dog and opens the driver's side door and all but falls out, rolling, and Steve does let go and the SUV tumbles down onto the

cobblestone streets below. An airsled with a dead Hydra pilot tumbles after it, gun still smoking.

“Vision,” Steve says. “We’re getting sniper support. Is it SHIELD?” He’s running through the trashed freeway, with some half-formed plan to grab an airsled and follow Tony and Sam.

“No,” says Vision. “There’s a man on the bridge.”

“Who?” Steve says. Ice clutches his heart. It can’t be James. James can barely walk right now.

“Identity unknown, Captain. I could try to get a closer scan, but--”

“Not important,” Steve says. “Stick with protecting civilians.” He glances up at the Brooklyn Bridge, in time to see a muzzle flash from the top of its closest tower. Behind him, there’s a thud, and he wheels around to see a Hydra goon who’d snuck up on his six fall off his airsled. Steve throws a quick salute in the direction of the bridge, then grabs the fallen Hydra soldier’s airsled and jumps up onto it.

Hydra tech’s not that hard to parse. Steve’s been doing it for 70 years.

He takes off over the East River, towards where Tony and Sam are surrounded by Hydra airsleds, like hawks hassled by crows. The sniper drops two Hydra pilots who try to follow him. Two bullets, two deaths. Steve slings his shield and knocks down three more that are tailing Sam.

“Okay, Tony, change of plan,” Steve says. “They’re expecting us to run to the Tower and I’m going to do just that. You need to find somewhere to stick that artifact other than its protective box. Then you’re going to hand the box off to me and I’m going to break north on my own. You’ll break south and take the long way around. Got it? Sam, you’ll go back to Pararescue. Cover those ferries getting civilians to safety.”

“Ugh. This is a football play, isn’t it?” Tony groans. “Always hated football. Also, precisely how am I going to find the breathing room to do this?”

“Hold on, Tony,” Steve says. “Miracle on its way. Hopefully.”

Steve prays this works. He looks straight at the bridge tower, where he hopes someone is watching him through a scope. He makes two very clear hand gestures: one straight at the sniper’s location, then pointing off to Tony. *Cover Tony*. He briefly wonders what the Russian army hand signals are, if they’re the same as the ones he knows.

“-the hell?!” comes Tony’s voice through the comm as two Hydra pilots’ heads explode in quick succession.

“Bro! Hawkeye back?” Sam crows.

“No,” Steve says. “Not Hawkeye. We ready for handoff?”

“Yeah,” Tony says, shifting the aluminum artifact case in his arm and dodging as a Hydra pilot, now with a hole in his head, takes his craft into a death-spiral into the East River.

“Okay. On my mark, we all rush together, then break apart in different directions. Stay away from population centres, these assholes use collateral damage as a weapon.” They’re down from about 100 Hydra airsleds to 30 but it’s still too many, enough to swamp any single one of them. But Steve will drag them away from civilians if he has to pay with his life in the process--

“Ready, Cap,” Sam says.

“*Mark.*”

Sam somersaults, flying in backwards, dropping Hydra aggressors left and right with two smoking guns. Steve flings his shield and catches it, then rolls behind it and into Tony. Sam's wings cover them all for a moment, then Steve grabs the case, says, “*GO,*” and they split.

\* \* \*

James is kneeling on top of the Brooklyn Bridge. The Indian is parked below on the pedestrian path and he's run up the supports, old pack, favourite heavy sniper rifle and a shit-ton of ammo on his back. He's kneeling. It's not the most accurate firing position but the battle is moving too fast, is too fluid, for him to fire prone.

He's kept most of the enemy on the airships away from Steve and then Steve had very clearly directed him to defend Iron Man. Did Steve know it was him? They were too far. There's no way he could see. A voice in his head scolds him, who else did Steve think it would be, *idiot*.

Then Steve and Iron Man and the black man with the wings are all together, and they split apart with the other two heading south but Steve is heading straight up the river towards him, the majority of the enemy on his tail, *shit shit shit--*

Steve is carrying something, a metal case. He needs his other hand to fly the airship. He can't defend himself. What the hell is he doing, this makes no sense. He's going to die-- James exhales and starts firing. 20 hostile. 19. 18. 17. 16. One bullet, one headshot. Like a machine. The hostiles' blue laser-guns flash past Steve, nicking his airship, bouncing off the shield on his back. 15. 14. 13. Change mags. Wait, that fucker is going low, what is he-- 12. 11. 10. 9. Breathe. Refocus. 8. 7.

He gets 6 in his crosshair and squeezes the trigger to fire at the same time as the hostile fires at Steve, but he doesn't fire at Steve, he fires into the back engine of the airship and it explodes, just as 6's head explodes, and through the scope James watches as Steve is thrown forwards, smashing his head against the front rail of the airship, and the whole thing spirals downwards into the water in black smoke and twisted metal.

A hostile grabs the aluminum case out of the air and James burns with rage, he fires numb but with perfect accuracy (*again, soldatik*) and drops the remaining five hostiles as Steve's airsled splashes into the river.

Then he abandons his gun and throws off his shoes and before he thinks through the wisdom of *any* of this he's in midair, diving off the top of the Brooklyn Bridge into the brown murk of the East River.

He flattens his hands out to punch through the surface and then he's underneath, minimal visibility, pulling through the water towards the place where Steve fell. He's always been a strong swimmer, what with his shoulders, and the East River in August beats the hell out of the Moscow River or the Dvina anytime.

James comes up for air at the approximate location of the crash site. Steve's team are occupied, the two flyers gone south, the rest helping grey government vans and people in blue uniforms handle civilian exfiltration. No help is coming. And too much to hope the airship had neutral buoyancy. He takes a deep breath, touches the knives at his back to make sure they're still there, and dives



down, following the taste of blood and jetfuel.

His lungs are burning when, after long minutes under the water, he spots a darker, jagged shadow, glinting occasionally, bubbles escaping from it. He struggles towards it, every molecule in his lungs screaming for him to surface but Steve's been under there longer, if James goes up for breath he'll die, and so he doesn't allow himself to be tired. He swims deeper and his fingers touch Steve's uniform, cold and slimy. He inches forwards until he can get his hand under the shield harness at the front of Steve's chest. He pulls.

Steve doesn't come. He's out cold, just dead weight in James' hand. And something is stuck on the wrecked airship, he can't see what it is and he can't breathe, his vision is starting to go--

To the devil with finesse.

James gets his other hand under the strap too and he just hauls, uses all his strength and something rips and snaps and he hopes to hell it's not part of Steve and then suddenly they're moving upwards, up towards the light and thirty seconds they break surface and James sucks air into his lungs in great, ragged gasps. He gets an arm under Steve and winds it into the harness so Steve can't slip and Steve is heavy and so is the shield and James looks into Steve's pale face as he treads water and pulls him close and tries to breathe air into his lungs. His lips are cold, almost blue.

Steve still doesn't breathe.

James breaks for the Brooklyn shore, hauling Steve with him. He can't do anything here in the middle of the river. The swim feels like forever, feels like they'll never get to the park next to the bridge, the green lawn a mirage at the edge of the water. At some point, when James feels like he's been swimming for his entire life, that his life only began when he hit the East River, he feels shallow breaths under his arm. Steve is still out cold, but he's breathing, and James lets out a long breath of his own, one he didn't know he was holding.

Five minutes, ten minutes, then he's hauling Steve up onto the grass of the pretty little bridge-side park in Brooklyn Heights, just south of the bridge. There are people lined up, who had been watching the battle, of course, Instagramming it. And the old feeling of terror hits James, the need to run, to hide, and once he hauls Steve out onto the grass and rolls him onto his side, he shakes his hair down over his face and gives in to his instinct. He wants desperately to stay with Steve until he wakes. To hold him; keep him warm. Even to just kiss him on the temple before he goes. But none of this is possible. There are witnesses, and he's left a customised Russian special forces sniper rifle on top of one of New York City's most famous landmarks.

He ghosts, just as people realise what's going on, who the figure pulled out of the water is. As James runs, all he can think is, at least Steve will be safe. At least someone will call 911, probably *after* they've posted a photo on social media.

He slinks past the onlookers on the bridge. All of them are looking south, not interested in a tall, tattooed hobo slipping barefoot along the pedestrian path. He shinnies up the gentle incline of the suspension rope, it's pathetically easy really, slips back into his abandoned sneakers, and packs down the KSVK into its case. He sweeps the casings off the bridge into the sea, and looks around carefully, making sure there is no trace of his presence. The bag is much lighter going back down. A couple, two girls holding hands, stare at him as he lightfoots down the suspension rope. He holds up his phone (hopefully they won't notice it's dripping wet) and smiles at them. "Got the most amazing photos!" he says, trying to imitate Darcy's accent.

The girls smile and one of them rolls her eyes. "That's really dangerous, yanno," she says.

James shrugs and throws a leg over the bike, backing it out.

\* \* \*

Phil Coulson falls into step next to Nick Fury as they head down to interrogate the Hydra soldiers captured after the Lower Manhattan attack. “I was just going through the satellite surveillance of the battle,” he said. “I thought this was interesting.”

He hands Fury his tablet.

Fury glances at it. It's a close-up aerial shot of the western end of the Brooklyn Bridge. Of a sniper on the bridge. Fury takes in the long hair; the distinctive tattoos visible under the gunman's short-sleeved tee. He grunts and hands the tablet back. “Very good. He misses the life. He's given us the carrot. Now all we need is the stick.”

\* \* \*

Steve wakes up, disoriented, in a white room. There's a movement in the corner of his eye and he lashes out, grabs. The nurse, a pretty Latina, drops her tray in surprise.

Her colleague, a neat aqua hijab matching her scrubs, steps forwards and puts her hands on Steve's arm. “Captain Rogers. You're on the medical floor of Avengers Tower. You fell in the East River battling Hydra, and have a nasty concussion.”

Steve lets go. “Sorry,” he breathes, glancing up at the nurse who he'd grabbed.

“It's okay,” she says. “We didn't expect you awake so soon. I'll just call the doctor.”

The doctor turns out to be Dr Cho, who Steve likes and trusts, and Tony appears too, looking exhausted and sucking on a tall glass of frozen green gloop.

“What happened?” Steve croaks.

Tony waves his smoothie as he lurks against the doorway. “Doctoring first. Then we'll talk.”

Dr Cho checks him out and grumbles about rest, but otherwise pronounces him to be healing well and able to leave the hospital by Saturday.

Steve tries to sit up. “But I have to be out Friday. I've got something--”

“*Steve*,” Tony says. “*Today* is Friday. You've been out for over 48 hours.” At Steve's startled expression, Tony mimes a knock to his own head. “Friday morning. 8am. Welcome back, Cap.”

“Dr Cho,” Steve says, “I have somewhere to be tonight. It's *important*.” And as he thinks of James, the fuzziness in his brain clears and he *remembers*. The battle. The sniper on the bridge. Remembers falling in the water, and then waking up on the grassy shorefront park in Brooklyn, wondering why James wasn't there.

His face must show his emotions, as Tony notices, then turns to pat Dr Cho's shoulder. "Helen. Thank you. We'll talk later, okay? Sorry. We need a minute here."

Dr Cho shakes her head in fond exasperation at Tony and clears herself and the nurses out, shutting the door behind her.

Tony flops into the chair next to Steve's bed and lets out a long, tired sigh.

"What," Steve says.

"I don't know," Tony says. "I don't know what. And I have a problem with that." He sucks on his smoothie like he wants to hurt it.

"I knew he was a top Russian special-ops sniper," Steve begins, almost apologetically. "And the swimming... I mean, he's built like a swimmer, and he's strong..."

Tony talks around his straw. "Jarvis, they blood test for entry into OpenGP?" Then to Steve, "Lots of sports test these days. No mutants or aliens allowed."

Jarvis' voice filters down from the ceiling. "Yes, sir. Yearly blood tests at the beginning of each season. James Barnes' results show he is clear of the mutant gene, and clear of all steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs."

"Okay. Medical records-- Steve, what hospital was it?"

"Oh. Uh... Methodist? The Speedway hospital," Steve says.

"You heard the man, Jarvis. Medical records for James Barnes, Methodist Hospital, Indianapolis." Tony swirled his smoothie and watched as blueberries bumped around in it like icebergs.

"I'm sorry, sir, apparently there was a security breach at the hospital last week, and those records, among others, were deleted."

"That's not suspicious at all," Tony deadpans. "Lemme guess. Russian hack?"

"It appears so, sir."

Tony lifts an eyebrow and looks at Steve.

"Let's not rush to conclusions," Steve breathes. "He could... he could have made it through that wreck in okay shape. He said they always pick the camera angles that make the crash look worst--" He trails off, as Tony holds up a hand.

"Steve. Listen to yourself," Tony says. "Look. I like the guy. I *really* do. And fuck it, he saved your life earlier. I'm not mad at him. I just want to know what's going on. He's hiding some big stuff, Steve. I'd feel better if I knew what it was."

"We don't have any *proof*," Steve says, his voice feeling small and distant.

Tony drops his forehead into a hand and massages his temples. He sighs. "I do," he says.

The look Steve gives him is pleading; broken. Tony can't meet those eyes. He looks down at his jeans; picks at a grease spot.

“His bike,” Tony says, finally.

He runs a hand over his face. “To be honest I'd be surprised if you could drive it. He literally has a jet engine in that thing. It's insane. I sort of love it. But he should be dead. The strength and reflexes he'd need to race that... he's not *human*, Steve. And he's not a mutant. So what is he?”

Steve leans his aching head back onto the strange, foamy hospital pillow and shuts his eyes.

*He's the other half of my soul.*

\* \* \*

By midafternoon, Steve has half annoyed, half convinced Dr Cho into clearing him to go home. And for once, he doesn't argue when Tony suggests he let Happy drive him home the limo.

He calls Natasha as they pass over the Queensboro Bridge. “So maybe you shouldn't beat yourself up so much about that Odessa mission,” he says. And then he tells her, all of it, Tony's suspicions, his confusion.

He can feel her smirk over the phone. “Steve. First. The day you get out of a hospital after being concussed is not the day to deal with this. Promise me you won't do anything rash?”

Steve groans, and eventually promises, somewhere over the Pulaski Bridge.

“Second, you have to understand something.” Natasha pauses. “Because you... I won't say you don't have secrets, because that's not true, we all do. But you... if someone asks you something, you'll answer them, and you'll tell them the truth. Because that's who you are. But it doesn't mean others can. If he was... *different*... under the Soviets, he's been hiding for a long time.”

She sighs. “It's hard to explain what that sort of hiding is like, to someone who didn't grow up under communism. No one holds a secret like a Russian. He may never be able to talk about it. And it doesn't mean he loves you any less. Don't blame him, Steve.”

“You'd tell me if he was Red Room, wouldn't you?” Steve asks.

Natasha hums. “He wasn't Red Room. I swear. There were other programmes, maybe half a dozen, but Steve... after the Soviet Union collapsed, I saw the lists. They all failed. Nobody survived. There was never a viable subject.”

Steve thinks back to Azzano, to all the dead soldiers, the mass graves, the bodies rotting in hallways on metal gurneys, arms pock-marked with needle tracks. A froglike man in little round glasses, stripping off his gloves and scuttling for the exit. A battalion captured, and only a hundred men (and one Peggy) freed. “Yeah,” he croaks. “I'm aware of the issues.”

He goes home in a daze, and stands under the shower for half an hour, letting the hot water run down over the body that so many have died trying to recreate. And not for the first time, he wonders if he was worth it.

\* \* \*

The restaurant is in the Meatpacking District, all cream wood and burgundy velvet banquettes and floor-to-ceiling windows, the better to display its glittering patrons. When Steve pulls up on his Harley, in his dress uniform, there's already a line of people behind velvet ropes outside, queuing for space at the bar area. And a dozen photographers.

He's there ten minutes early, and James is nowhere to be seen. Fear clutches briefly at Steve's stomach. What if James doesn't show? They hadn't spoken since Steve had left him to go fight Hydra... should he have re-confirmed? It's too late now.

Steve squares his shoulders, dismounts the bike, and puts on his best Captain America smile for the cameras.

*“Cap, who are you having dinner with?”*

*“Cap! Gay rumours! Confirm or deny?”*

*“Are you in a relationship, Cap?”*

Smile. Wave. Walk past.

He exhales once he's inside the restaurant. The maitre-d takes him to a corner banquette by the window, possibly the best table in the house. With a clear view of it from outside, so everyone can watch him get stood up. He orders a mineral water and brings out his phone. Never has he been so glad of 21<sup>st</sup> century social props as he is at this moment. At first he was annoyed by people jabbing at their phones in the middle of dinner, but now he realises the comfort of technology. You're never alone if you have your phone. You don't have to meet all the questioning eyes, when there's a screen to look at. He pulls up the biography he's reading and dives into it.

*“...Hi.”* Low and rough. Slight accent.

The phone tumbles out of Steve's hands as he stands up. He's blushing, and his heart is thundering in his chest. He can't stop the big dopey grin that spreads across his face. “Hey,” he says, as his breath catches in his throat, because *well*.

James is in a suit.

Steve wasn't quite sure what James would wear. He'd only seen James at the shop, in old, holey t-shirts and jeans. He honestly thought that James probably didn't even own anything nice. But here he is, in a suit that has to be handmade because it shapes to his athletic body perfectly. It's all black, narrow satin lapels on the jacket and slim trousers that do frankly unfair things to his ass and thighs, paired with a black shirt and tie. For once, his hair is not pulled back, falling in shiny, dark waves. Steve knows it feels like silk, and his hand twitches with the urge to reach out and bury his fingers in it.

They're drawn to each other like two magnets, and Steve circles a hand around the back of James'

neck and kisses him hello in front of the window, in front of God and man and half of the Meatpacking District. He knows it's not stars he sees as he shuts his eyes and their tongues brush, he knows it's just flashbulbs, but it *feels* like stars.

“Wow,” Steve breathes as they part, looking James up and down.

James is nervous, and the delighted half-smirk he gives Steve makes his heart skip a beat. “You like?”

Steve nods as he sits down.

James tucks his hair behind an ear as he eases himself into the chair opposite Steve and whispers, “Lukin liked his generals to dress well.”

Steve smiles. “Is that why all the t-shirts and jeans now?”

James grins, delighted. “Yeah.” He prods at a fork. “Also, motor oil, even harder to get out of clothes than blood.” His pale eyes flash up to Steve. “Sorry I didn't call. My phone went for a swim.”

“Yeah. About that,” Steve begins, reaching out to link his fingers with James'. But then the waiter is there, and that thread of conversation withers as they order, and James tries to hide his amusement at how starstruck the waiter is by Steve. And how the waiter's eyes keep travelling to where their fingers are laced together on the table.

The waiter compliments them on their order, turns to go, turns back, blurts out, “please consider marching in Pride next year, it would mean a lot,” and then walks away, positively vibrating with nerves.

James lifts Steve's hand to his lips and kisses his knuckles, then starts biting and sucking at his fingertips. Steve has to shift the way he is sitting, and has half a mind to pull his hand away because he's getting way more riled up than he should be at dinner, but – but maybe he can just relax and let something feel good.

James tugs his teeth over Steve's index finger then looks up at him. “You okay? After...” he makes a vague gesture with his free hand.

Steve nods. “Had a pretty bad concussion.” He does withdraw his hand now, because he *needs* to talk about this. His voice drops to a whisper, to a level that a normal human would have trouble hearing. “It was, it was you, wasn't it? The sniper on the bridge. The, the person who pulled me out of the water.”

James seems to crumple a little, and he nods once, a small movement.

“Well.” Steve looks down at his cutlery. The spoon is slightly crooked; he straightens it. “Thank you for saving my life.” He looks up at James. How does he ask? He needs to know. *By the way, you're not really human, are you?* He twists the napkin in his lap, and is saved from the awkward pause stretching on too long by the arrival of their food. They'd both gotten steaks; the restaurant's deal was apparently super-exclusive local Hudson Valley beef. French bistro food done with ridiculously expensive ingredients from farms no more than 100 miles away. Truffle fries with truffles sourced from the Catskills; potatoes grown on Long Island. Steve flinches as James picks up his steak knife and, distractedly, not even thinking, spins it over his fingers as if it's a fighting blade.

“Sorry, I--” James begins, then puts the knife down. “...old habits.” He looks at Steve and his

expression is lost, sad, and a little scared. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Steve says, and smiles a smile which doesn't reach his eyes. It's a Captain America smile. "Eat your food. The world's most pampered cow died for our stomachs."

James snorts and shakes his head, and begins to cut his steak. "First time I had kobe beef, I thought Lukin was fucking with me." He looks up, knife loose in his hand. "I'm a street kid. I eat cheap shit, and what I can steal, and then army rations. My first hit for him, Lukin takes me out afterwards--" then he pauses, nervous. He tilts his head slightly. "It's okay if I talk about this?"

Steve nods. If James talks, he doesn't have to. He's *slept* with this man, and... what *is* he?

James continues. He isn't stupid. He knows he's just filling space, telling meaningless stories so the atmosphere doesn't get any worse. "Anyway, he takes me out to this Japanese place. Very fancy. On Stoleshnikov Pereulok, next to all the foreign stores. Orders the food. Says to me, Misha, this beef, the cows are fed special organic grass that cost so many rubles a kilo, and every day they are given massages. He said this like it was supposed to make the meat taste better." James pushes his fries around his plate. "But after he told me, everything was ashes in my mouth for the rest of the night. Money is a funny thing. When the cows for rich people's hamburgers are treated better than the poor."

James looks up, direct and hard. "I mean, fuck communism. Seriously, *fuck communism*. But capitalism is some bullshit too." He sighs and looks out the window at the paparazzi, still lurking outside, taking the occasional picture. "Like I can complain. I took Lukin's money. Bought the shop with it." He goes to turn the knife in his fingers, and catches himself, putting it down and placing his hand in his lap.

"At the end of the meal in the Japanese restaurant, my welcome-to-the-family celebration, Lukin makes a phone call. He says a few things in English. Then he hangs up and says to me that my appearance embarrasses him. He says, Misha, go to London, you have an appointment with my tailor, you need to dress better. As I get on the plane the next morning, he hands me a gun case, and a piece of paper with three names on it. He says, while you're there, Misha, kill these people."

They both sit there for a couple minutes without talking, the *tinks* and *klanks* of forks on plates like tiny alarms going off in the painful silence, then James says, "*fuck*," and puts his head in his hands. The plates clatter slightly.

Steve leans across and brushes James' hair with his hand. "It's okay."

"What am I doing wrong?" James says, his voice quiet, and shaking slightly.

Steve slips his hand around to take one of James'. "Maybe we should go talk somewhere more... quiet."

James nods, and squeezes his hand.

Tony had apparently told the restaurant to put the dinner on his tab, so Steve and James were free to go. Steve slung an arm around James' waist to guide him out, and both of them kept their heads down as the flashbulbs went and the questions were shouted. Steve knew the fact that he wasn't smiling and waving on the way out would cause a rash of *Trouble in paradise* and *Breakup imminent* headlines, *Captain America and mystery man on the rocks!*, but some nights he just can't do it. This had become one of them.

"Did you drive here?" Steve asks, when they reach where Steve's Harley is parked.

James shakes his head. "Took a cab." A sad, wry smirk twitches at the corner of his lips. "Didn't want to mess up my suit." He tucks his head into the crook of Steve's neck. "It's why I was late. Cabs are slooow."

Steve can't deal with him so close. With the thing that happens when they touch, the electricity that vibrates between them. He pokes at James' ribs. "It's called a speed limit," he says, in his Captain America Disapproves voice.

James looks up at him, mocking, aghast. "Speed limit is only a *suggestion*, Steve." Then his eyes dart over to a line of cars and motorcycles quietly lurking in wait for them to leave, paparazzi in passenger seats or riding pillion, and his voice becomes serious. "They're going to follow us. Let me drive?"

Steve presses the keys into James' hand and settles behind him on the bike. James tugs off his tie, sticks it in a pocket, and glances back as he starts the engine. "Hold on tight," he murmurs. That's all the warning Steve gets as the tyres screech and Steve has to grab at James' waist and press himself against James' hard back and adrenaline surges through him as they take off like a bat out of hell.

Steve glances back; the paparazzi are scrambling to catch up. James takes them north, up the Westside Highway, then across Harlem and back down to the Midtown Tunnel and the BQE back to Red Hook. It's a ridiculous, roundabout way to get home, but it seems to take no time at all as they are flying, taking the whole thing at just north of 100mph, dodging between other vehicles like they were standing still. It's an uncomfortable feeling, the fabric of your trouser leg brushing up against a car on the freeway as you cut between it and another vehicle via a space which already feels too small and is closing off by the millisecond. Steve must flinch at one point after a particularly tight dodge, because James drops a hand down and squeezes his thigh briefly in reassurance, before returning it to the handlebars.

By the time James cuts the throttle, slowing down to a comfortable cruise through Red Hook, they've lost all the paparazzi. Steve thinks they probably lost them even before they left Manhattan. James cuts off the engine in Steve's usual parking space behind his apartment, dismounts and tosses the keys back to Steve.

Steve catches them, and groans. "Don't make that *your bike is slow* face at me," he says.

James holds up his hands in surrender. "It *is* slow, though."

"Come up?" Steve asks, heading to the door. "We... I need to ask you something."

James stands there for a moment, and Steve knows him well enough now to see he's nervous as hell. Eventually he nods, and follows.

They make it up to Steve's apartment without Sharon seeing, thank heavens. James shuts the door and leans against it, waiting. Steve looks at him, then has to look away. He is ridiculously beautiful, his hair touselled and cheeks pink from the wind. All Steve wants to do is press himself against James and leave all the unasked questions and unchallenged lies until another time.

He glances at his watch. It's just gone midnight. He only promised Natasha he wouldn't do anything rash on Friday. But it's Saturday now. He swallows and looks at the man he's in love with. "James... what are you?"

James pushes off from the wall and walks further into the room, getting space between him and Steve, placing himself somewhere more defensible. He appears relaxed but Steve can tell he's



wired, his body is tense and coiled. "I don't know what you mean," James says, too lightly.

"Don't-- Don't treat me like I'm stupid," Steve says. He steps closer, within arm's reach, but no farther than that. This isn't the time to crowd him. James still says nothing, just watches him out of the corner of his eye like a caged tiger. "You're not a mutant. Or an alien. Unless you faked your blood tests."

"I didn't fake them," James mumbles, his hair slipping out from behind his ear and across his face.

"What are you?" Steve repeats.

"Don't ask that," James says, his voice a small, desperate whisper.

"James!" Steve says. He steps into James' space.

"*No.*" James almost shouts it at him, twisting fast, getting into Steve's face. His fists are balled at his sides, and the arms of the suit strain slightly over his biceps.

Steve steps back, pacifying, and takes a deep breath. So this is how it's going to be.

He hauls off and swings a widowmaker of a punch at James.

He doesn't hold anything back, not any of his enhanced strength, or his speed. If it connects, it'll just about take James' head off.

But it doesn't.

Steve didn't have much of a plan, other than *punch James and see what happens*, and the next moment he's on his back on the floor and James is on top of him, pinning his arms above his head.

And James is *furious*. "You want to know what I am? Fine," he snarls. "*This* is what I am." He grips Steve's arms a little tighter, and Steve pushes against the grip, trying to free his arms, and--

He can't.

He uses all the strength in his miraculous science body, those huge arms and thick back muscles and he *can't* push out of James' grip. James is using all his strength too, Steve can see the shift of muscles through his clothes, at the base of his neck. James just cocks his head and glares at him and repeats, voice suddenly husky, "*This is what I am.*"

And Steve presses upwards, arching his back, still struggling to get out of that iron grip that holds him down, and then he realises that's not what he's doing at all, that he's harder than he's ever been in his life and if he doesn't get some friction against his cock, if he doesn't feel James against him, he's going to explode.

His eyes meet James' and those pale eyes are dim, black and lidded with lust, and Steve moans and finally James presses down with a snarl and grinds against him, their hard cocks slotting next to each other through their trousers. James doesn't let up one little bit on the force he's exerting on Steve's arms, and every muscle in his torso and thighs is flexing as he grinds on Steve.

Steve closes his eyes and his mouth goes slack as sensation shoots through him. He groans and throws a leg over James' ass, pulling him down tighter. He's going to come in his pants like a teenager any moment now. He stammers out his desires to James; he's so turned on, more than he's ever been before. They match. *They match.*

“James, f-fuck me,” he stutters. “Hold me down and fuck me,” and he means right there, right then, rough and on the floor, but James has other ideas.

James grinds down on Steve one more time, hair hanging down into Steve's face and moaning as a shiver runs through his body. Then he rolls off Steve and picks him up, throwing him over his shoulder. Steve squawks in surprise and James grumbles, “watch your head,” as he carries him into the little hallway that leads off the living room.

“Bedroom,” James says, and Steve taps his left shoulder and points. James carries him through and tosses him on the bed like he weighs nothing. Steve's brain was still mostly not functioning, still just spinning in amazement and dealing with the fact that James was his equal in every way and it was *incredibly fucking erotic*.

He rubs himself through his thick uniform trousers and bites his lip. James leans over him, jacket gone, shirt half undone, and his hair tickling across Steve's forehead. “You sure you want it?” James asks. “Like this?” His voice is a little amazed, a little unsure, and thick with desire.

Steve nods. “More than I've ever wanted anything.” He clenches his ass and lifts up his pelvis again, and he wants James inside him, wants to feel the burn of his thick cock pushing in, and wants to see how rough he can take it.

James grunts, and sinks down to bite at Steve's neck, hard. His right hand travels down to Steve's crotch, pressing up to him, and he grabs Steve through his trousers and squeezes.

Steve whines his need, and James growls into his neck, “*Strip.*”

James lifts off him and leans over to the bedside table, yanking out the drawer, as Steve fumbles with buttons and belts. James fishes around in the drawer, shoving aside the old, beat-up Army-issue bible, a couple of clean handkerchiefs, and a little metal field compass, until he finds the lube.

Steve has his jacket off and his trousers are halfway off and James grabs them and pulls them all the way off. His own follow a moment later; his shirt over his head. And Steve's breath catches in his throat as he sees James naked, all coiled muscle and sheen of sweat and shaved and so, so hard. So many things fall into place then. The not drinking. The fact that he eats as much as Steve, and that those muscles never fade, never waste away, even when he's been laid up for over a week in splints. The healing.

The reason you can't kill Winter.

“They made one, didn't they,” Steve gasps. “The Soviets. They made a super-soldier. They made *you*.”

James nods once, then kneels back down over Steve and grabs his tie, pulling him into a searing kiss.

Steve melts against him, melts into his lips, then frames those gorgeous cheekbones with his hands, and gently pushes James away. “How,” Steve breathes, eyes wide, amazement and admiration in his voice.

James leans in and whisper-smiles against his lips. “I'm a failed experiment. Can't you tell?” He grabs Steve's arms, forcing them over his head again and yeah, that's still... *fffffuck*, Steve thinks. James stretches down and bites at one of Steve's nipples and Steve bucks and *shouts*, and then thinks to himself *Sharon please don't come barging in*.

“No shouting,” James grumbles, rolling Steve over so he's on his stomach. “I mean, I love making you shout, fuck it turns me on, Steve, but it'll make the tedious blonde with the gun appear.”

Steve snorts out a laugh and then it's choked out of him as he feels his ass being parted and James' cock pressing up against his hole. He gasps and presses back, God yes...

“This okay?” James says. “M'gonna go real slow.” And he's pushing into Steve, burning pressure and fullness and warmth, and Steve bites the pillow because it feels so good and he's going to scream again, he's going to come, and the head of James' cock has barely breached into him. James leans down over him, hair brushing over his back, nipples tracing against him, as he sucks in a shuddering breath. “Fuck, Steve...” James says.

And it's too slow. Steve wants it all. He wants it now. He's never... he's never had sex with anyone like him before and he can *let go*, finally let go, and James needs to stop treating him like he's made of porcelain--

He bows his back and reaches back and grabs James' thick thighs and rams himself back down on James, all the way to the root, and it hurts but it's so good and now James grabs him around the chest and buries a shout into his shoulder, biting down hard. James grits out a *dammit, Steve*, and then Steve can feel James coming inside him, James' arm like iron around his waist. Steve grabs his own cock and fists it hard, bringing himself off too and James just has his face buried in the back of Steve's neck, shaking through his orgasm, made all the more intense by Steve's body contracting around him as Steve comes all over the bedsheets.

Steve pants, riding the wave of sunlit pleasure coursing through him, and when he comes somewhere near back down to earth he pushes up onto his elbows and rolls his hips experimentally. And smirks. As suspected, James is still hard. *Yeah*, super-serum. He glances back over his shoulder. “That all you got, soldier?”

He's met with a wicked glint of ice-blue eye. “Fuck you, Rogers.”

Steve hums as he thrusts back against James. “Yeah, you say that, but I'm still waiting.”

James growls and shoves Steve down onto the bed, and grabs his upper arms just above the elbow, pinning him down. *God, yes*, Steve thinks, but then James all but pulls out of Steve and no no no, he feels so empty--

--until James *slams* back into him. It shoves him up the bed, but since his arms are pinned he has nowhere to go, and the friction of his cock against the sheets is unbelievable, and he can't help the half-shout, half-moan of lust fulfilled that escapes his lips.

James pulls out again and snarls a little question. "Yes, yes, yes--" Steve chokes out and James slams in again, setting up a punishing pace, and then he shifts angle, ramming down and pushing into Steve's prostate and Steve's entire body jerks like he's been electrified, toes curling in bliss. "Harder," Steve groans. "More. Let go, please, just let go, you know you can--"

And James lets out a little moan and dips down to place a kiss on his back, easing up a little and no, that's not what Steve wanted *at all* and he's about to demand again when James' lips brush the back of his neck and James whispers, "I love you so much. I would die for you. I'm sorry if what I did on the bridge was wrong."

Steve wants to say, no, it wasn't wrong, but he can't, he can feel the fire in his groin unspooling and he's so close to coming again because *he is so in love with this man* and James must be close too because he starts slamming into Steve again, hard and rough, no rhythm, no attempt to control it or hold back, all that size and power wrapped around him, in him, and Steve's orgasm builds like a wave, impossibly high, he *needs* it like this, loves it, and then his world is coming to pieces in shards of brilliant light and he throws his head back so he can lay it against James' and they're together, so together, the two of them against the world, freaks and failures and mistakes, the best worst experiments, and James' hands let go of his arms and reach back to wrap around his chest as they both shudder into giant, cataclysmic release.

They fall asleep like that, twined around each other, James still inside him, slow, steady heartbeats and enhanced lungs falling into perfect sync, and tonight at least the nightmares pause outside their window and decide to pass them by.

\* \* \*

James comes home the next morning to find Darcy in his apartment, baking, in a black 1950s-style dress with baby octopi printed on it, a pink petticoat rustling underneath. Pingu is at her feet, doing her best to "help", aka trip, Darcy by lying down right behind her whenever she stops for a moment. "Thanks for taking care of Pingu," he mumbles.

She eyes the disheveled suit he's half-wearing, and the dazed, blissed-out expression in his eyes, and grins. "Ooh, did I miss the James Barnes walk of shame?"

James grins back and throws his tie at her. "I have no shame about what I did last night."

"Clearly not," Darcy says.

He slinks back towards the bedroom area. "M'gonna shower."

"Okay," she chirps. "I'll open up downstairs. Take these out when you're done?" she asks, indicating the cake pops she just stuck in the oven. "Timer's all set."

James waves vaguely in acceptance as he strips off his shirt.

The shower feels good. He's fairly sure everyone could smell how badly he reeked of sex on the walk home; there had been wake-up sex too, because they could. And because James had woken

up hard and aching for Steve to fuck him as hard as he'd drilled Steve the night before. They'd fucked facing each other, James sitting in Steve's lap and riding his cock, staring into each other's eyes like a couple of lovesick fools, and it was supposed to be hard and fast but instead it ended up slow, with breaks for kissing and exploring each others' bodies with their hands, until suddenly it wasn't slow any more, and it ended with another series of electrifying, spine-cracking orgasms. And Steve only seemed to love him more, once he knew what James was.

Ugh, he was hard again in the shower. And Darcy's goddamn pastries were going to need to come out of the oven soon.

He jerks himself off, thinking about Steve, about how many things he wants to do to him, to try out with him. And he spills for the fifth time in twelve hours, gasping Steve's name as his cum swirls down the shower drain.

He's dressed in skinny jeans (his only clean jeans, he needs to deal with the laundry situation soon), boots and an old white t-shirt and is taking Darcy's cake pops out of the oven when he hears something... off. The windows in the living room overlook the street in front of the shop, and where they are in Red Hook is a backwater within a backwater. The streets are quiet; nobody goes quickly as there is nowhere to *get* quickly from here.

He knows this sound.

Armoured SUVs. Land Rovers.

They'll have dark windows and ride low, the weight of the armour plating sagging against the suspension. Three-- no, four.

The tray of cake pops falls to the ground.

He's fast, he's always been half-prepared for this, his whole goddamn life.

First his old street-racing jacket; it's kevlar-lined and intimidating as hell. Under the bed, the gun cases. Leg holsters and a back holster and the sheaths for the knives; his hands don't shake as he works all the straps, buckling and tying. This, he knows. Skorpion on his back; the two Gyurzas, the pistols he knows like his own hands, in the thigh holsters. He drops a Beretta into his boot, just in case. The belt with the extra clips and ammo is already filled; it's never been emptied. He buckles it on and runs downstairs. The SUVs are maybe a block away, maybe two.

"DARCY!" he shouts.

"What? Dude, did you burn my cakes?" she says. Then she turns to look at him and her jaw drops. The black leather. All the weapons.

"Go upstairs now," he growls. "You and Pingu. Get in the bathtub. Shut the door. Do not come out until I get you."

Darcy grabs Pingu's collar and leads her to the staircase. "W-what's going on?" she stutters, pale with fear. "What's happening?"

James turns his back on her and palms the two pistols out of their holsters, waiting for the storm that will come through his front door with lead and fire.

"*Judgement*," he says.

## Chapter End Notes

uuuuuuuuah. super long chapter. I feel if there's one thing I've cornered the market on in this fic, it's super-awkward conversations.

[Chapter title song.](#)

Darcy's outfit at the end is based on a fabric designed by my friends Sarah and Evan, [check out these dresses, SO CUTE.](#)

Also: yes, I know, Jarvis is supposed to be Vision and Vision is Jarvis in the MCU and ugh, AOU continuity, just... fuck it, this is an AU and I'm saying they both exist contemporaneously and we're all just gonna deal.

Also also, I wanted to rec [this recent fic](#) as a really fun bamf!Bucky fic! I enjoyed it a lot.

I used to live places where if you saw four black Land Rovers with tinted windows coming down the street together, you just got the whole fuck out of there as fast as you could. (I also remember moving back to London and forgetting Guy Fawkes Day was a thing, and ditching off my bicycle when the fireworks went off because bombs. Fun times!)

Your comments give me life.

On the subject of motorcycles with jet engines in them, meet [the MTT 420R](#). If Tony Stark designed a bike, this would probably be it.



# O Children

## Chapter Summary

□  
art by [Rohkeutta](#)

In which problems are not solved by shooting or yelling, but not for lack of trying.

*TW: This chapter contains significant, graphic violence to humans and animals. It also features a past abuser using control methods.*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first armoured SUV says it with explosives, sending a grenade flying towards Red Star Bike Repair as it screeches past and turns to block the road. The other three, on its tail, will say it with guns. The odds are bad, twenty men probably, he thinks as the other three SUVs lurch to a halt and begin disgorging men, Ukrainians and Russians and the odd American, all part of Odessa's *bratva* network in the US. No, scratch that-- the odds are terrible, for a normal gunman.

But James is not normal.

James catches the grenade before it hits the ground and wings it right back at them. The explosion injures only a couple of the men but it shakes them up, gives him the moment he needs as the smoke clears.

He stands in front of the double doors of his shop, strapped for war, skinny jeans and kevlar-lined motorcycle jacket painted with a white cross for everyone he has killed. He is unnaturally still, a rock, a thing that will not be moved. He speaks to them in Russian, a low growl: “<You know who I am. You will leave my territory now, of your own free will, or you will leave later, in a body bag.>” His eyes sweep over them, memorising faces. This will not be forgotten. Or forgiven. “<It is all the same to me.>”

It's not the younger ones who look nervous. War is, after all, a young man's game. This is probably their first firefight, the first time doing anything other than breaking shopkeepers' knees and slicing up the trafficked girls to teach them a lesson. But the older men, the ones old enough to scream awake at night with the terrors of old fights, the ones who know the song the bullet sings, they move slow. They let the kids go first.

And the kids do.

A tall, skinny *vor* with a shaved head pulls an uzi out of the back of his baggy, acid-wash jeans and struts forwards like a young bull, snarling. “<Shut your faggot mouth before I come over there and shit in it, *uecmëpka*.>” He laughs as he starts firing, and this emboldens his friends to pull out their weapons and take aim too.

Except the conveniently stationary target is no longer stationary, not even in the two seconds it takes the Uzi's entire clip of 20 rounds to empty out and sting furiously through the air, like tiny



metal horns. The skinny tough's mouth falls open when he realises that James has moved forwards and flipped into the air, twisting his body about six feet off the ground in a way that someone of his sheer size and musculature *shouldn't* be able to do, twisting *around* the bullets, and the last thing he sees as 9mm of death from the silenced Gyurza enters his brain are Winter's cold, blank eyes moving on from him to the next target; the last thing he hears is a rough, amused drawl, "<Seven. Not six.>"

Things go to hell pretty fast after that.

James shoots three more of the younger gangsters, picking off the ones with assault rifles, as he arcs through the air. Then he is on the ground, and the more battle-hardened gangsters are stepping back, finding cover, getting behind the armoured doors and windows of the SUVs. A few others are just standing there like idiots, *staring*, as they finally get to witness the thing about Winter, they finally *understand*, that he isn't just lucky or brutal. No. He is faster; stronger than any human they have ever seen; moving with the utter confidence and ruthless efficiency of a man who has lived through far worse things than a gunfight as he mows down targets, one bullet, one life.

And on a quiet Red Hook street of warehouses and machine shops, they are getting a front-row command performance of those abilities, a show presented only for the dead and those soon to join them.

James strides down the street, gunning down the easy targets, the ones frozen by fear, before leaping easily onto the roof of the nearest SUV. He fires directly down through the roof, taking out unlucky number thirteen as he cowers, just the driver, just doing a favour for cousin Vladi. That leaves twelve, and his vantage point eliminates most of their cover. It also makes him a very hot cat on a very small tin roof as the twelve men forget about reward, forget about trophies, and shoot at him to stay alive.

The pop, pop, pop of gunfire echoes down the brick and plaster façades of the street as men dart from cover long enough to fire, then retreat back. James fires and dodges, and this, now, this is the ugly part of the fight. The siege, where the remaining bratva hunker down behind armor and in alleys and sneak out to pop fast shots at him, and he tries to lay down enough suppressing fire to keep them from having the time to get off a killing shot.

And in that Saturday morning August sunshine, a big man with the rough knuckles and cauliflower ears of a boxer, a man that likes to think he knows what he's doing, catches his leather jacket on the corner of a car door as he leans out to fire at James.

The boxer squeezes off half the clip in one go, spraying the shots at the level of James' lower back, then yanks and swears at his jacket. He doesn't see James turn and roll down below his line of bullets; he does hear the unmistakeable *ptaf* of the silenced pistol, like the clearing of a throat, among the pop-pop of gunfire and hopes the shot isn't for him, but it is, it is, and he spins as the bullet enters his chest, his jacket finally tearing free from the metal edge it had gotten snagged in.

But he's not the only one with his name on a bullet.

One of the old men gets James then, hunched behind a door of an SUV at the end of the block, patient with his old service Makarov, not aiming for a glory shot, just one that will bring Aleksander Lukin's holy terror down. The bullet sinks into James' right calf just as he shifts his weight onto that leg, and he is falling, off the SUV, tumbling gracelessly towards the pavement below.

\* \* \*

Darcy cowers in the big, claw-footed steel bathtub in James' apartment, the flared skirt of her day dress and the pink petticoat underneath it taking up about half the space on their own. Pingu is jammed in next to her, nose wedged into her armpit, shivering uncontrollably, as Darcy listens to the pop and zing of bullets outside on the street. Listens to shouts in Russian, and cries of pain, cries that occasionally end in strange, gurgling gasps, and Darcy prays *not James not him you can't have him*.

Her fingers are shaking so badly as she texts Steve she's afraid that it won't make any sense so she sticks with the basics, in a series of texts.

DL: RUSSANS

DL: Tryign to kill James

DL: @ shop ned help plz come

Then she opens up Notes. One night, about a year after Darcy had started working for James, he'd stopped her as he was leaving, and asked her for her phone. He had typed up a note in Cyrillic on it, and a phone number, and said if anything ever happened to him she was to text that message to that number. Darcy was pretty sure that 20 armed mafia dudes trying to kill James qualified as “something happening to him” and so she figured now was a very good time to send that message. At worst, James would get mad and maybe have to text the number again and say everything was okay. It takes her almost five minutes to send the message as the fiddliness of copy-paste is more than she's super able to handle rn, tbh.

There is no reply from Steve, or from the weird foreign number.

Darcy rubs Pingu's big wedge head. “It's gonna be okay, girl. Everything's gonna be okay,” she says, choking on the words, hot tears on her cheeks.

\* \* \*

James falls, and the *bratva* soldiers come out from the shadows. He falls through a hail of bullets, twisting to dodge the worst, one opening a bad gash on his right cheekbone. He drops the pistols and arches his back, landing on his hands and turning the fall into a roll. The Skorpion is in his hands as he comes up.

He can put weight on the leg if he ignores the pain. Good thing they spent a lot of time training him to do that.

Four of the *bratva* are fully out of cover now, two in front, two behind. They're already firing. He twists and takes down the two in front then turns and walks towards the ones that were behind him. Slow. No need to rush. Can't, on his leg anyway. The two *bratva* toughs in front of him now, one

has black hair in a bad bowl cut, and a broken nose. His friend, pale skin and freckles under tiny, deep eyes, pulls a grenade out of his pocket and fiddles with the pin. Broken Nose's eyes are wide with fear as he pulls the trigger on his Glock 19 at James.

They grow wider as James lets the bullets hit him across the chest, leather tearing slightly to reveal the kevlar underneath, and keeps walking, raising his own gun. “<What the hell are you?>” says Broken Nose.

“<Nothing you will ever live to report,>” James says, and shoots him. He kills Broken Nose, and then Tiny Eyes who spins as he dies, falling on his own grenade. Four seconds later, the grenade goes off, splattering pieces of Tiny Eyes all over the street.

James reaches down and takes the Glock out of Broken Nose's cooling fingers, his cold eyes sweeping the area for the hostiles' next move. He feels better now, a gun in each hand again. One brigade still hunkers down at the end of the street. He can hear two of the Ukrainians heading up the fire escape of the machine shop across the street. In a moment they'll be nicely silhouetted on the rooftop. Two more are in the alley next to Red Star. *His* alley.

They're next.

He stalks towards them, diagonally, keeping an eye on the group down the end of the block. “<Step out here and die like men,>” he growls at the two taking cover in the alley. They scuttle further back, towards the workshop door. If they dare go into *his home*--

The roar of an engine makes him turn.

The old man with the Makarov, the one who had shot him in the calf, decides he's had enough. This is taking too long; if they don't get killed, they're going to be arrested. He motions for the remaining three members of his brigade to pile back into their SUV, the one blocking the Eastern end of the street. The old man smashes down the accelerator, the engine howls to life and the SUV zooms forwards, heading straight at James.

The gangsters put down the windows and lean out, guns at the ready. They can't get up much speed in half a block but they're still pushing 40mph as they reach James, figuring if they hit him, great, and if not they can fire off a few shots and then just get the fuck out of there.

But there is a third option they didn't expect.

\* \* \*

Steve is in the shower when Darcy's text arrives. He doesn't hustle to his phone when he heard the alert; just assumes it's Tony or Sam or maybe Clint. Towels off; brushes his hair; scratches himself. Strolls out into the living area and pauses as he reaches to check his phone on the kitchen island. The window is open to let in air and he can hear, faint but unmistakeable, the sound of gunfire a few blocks away.

He reaches for his phone. What the--

The phone hits the floor two seconds after that. Ten seconds later, Steve is out the door, in sneakers, sweatpants and a t-shirt, shield on his arm.

It takes too fucking long to get to the shop. He can run faster than almost any human on earth and it's still too goddamn slow. His heart is thundering in his chest, every bullet he hears could be *the* bullet, and he knows James can take care of himself but there are so many people shooting, all it takes is a little bad luck to be a lot dead.

Steve rounds the corner. Two hostiles behind SUVs. Two more climbing up a fire escape to a nearby roof. And James in the middle of the street just standing there as an SUV heads straight for him, moving in a straight line and accelerating--

What the hell is he doing, Steve thinks, that SUV is going to smash straight into him, why is he holstering his guns--

And then just as chrome should meet bone, James is in the air, he's actually leapt *backwards* to account for the SUV's speed and he lands in a crouch on its hood, his weight a little funny, and Steve sees the blood running down his right foot. The driver of the car twists the wheel to and fro, trying to shake James off, but he might as well be trying to shake off a tank.

The guy riding shotgun is actually levering a sawn-off shotgun out the window, trying to bend it around to shoot James, when James hauls his arm back and punches through the windshield. Steve gapes as James rips the steering wheel out of the car and throws it away behind him. It's one thing to know that James is his equal in strength and speed, but quite another to see all of that power in action. There's a directness, a ruthlessness in his fighting style, as if normal human instincts of self-preservation have been stripped from him. He doesn't fight enemies. He goes *through* them.

And Steve can't stop watching. It's... magnificent.

James is up on one knee now, in a firing position, and draws the semiautomatic holstered on his back. He empties a clip into the car, before cartwheeling nimbly off the now doomed vehicle.

He lands neatly on the street and stands there, tall and proud like the God of War himself, as the SUV, still accelerating, smashes into a sister vehicle at the end of the street and rolls onto its back, wheels still spinning, in a cloud of oily smoke.

Then James turns to look at Steve. When he speaks, there's no anger, no emotion at all. Just... a strange, unnatural calmness. "Steve. Two of these assholes went inside *my home*. Darcy is there. Take care of them." He stalks over and retrieves two silenced pistols from the street. "I have the ones on the roof."

Steve nods. "Got it." He almost says *be careful* but he's not sure James understands what that means. Then he turns and runs into the alley and through the back door of the shop.

Steve pauses, listening. Footsteps above him. He runs up the spiral staircase just as a scream echoes through James' apartment.

Darcy is being pulled out of the bathroom by her hair. She's kicking and fighting the roided-up gym freak who's got her, but he throws her down against the floor and her head hits it with a sickening KRAK and then he's fisting his hand in her hair, pulling her head up and putting a pistol against her temple.

Then Steve realises it wasn't Darcy who screamed. It's Pingu. Another guy comes out of the bathroom, a little guy who has ears like a wingnut and a grin like an idiot, displaying a mouth full of gold teeth to match the thick chains around his neck. He has Pingu by the scruff of her neck and the dog is terrified, she's pissed herself and is screaming. Steve's never heard a dog scream and he never wants to again.

Grinning Idiot slams Pingu against the wall, shouting something in Russian that probably means *shut up*.

“Okay,” Steve says, barely keeping his temper in check. “You guys really don't want to do any of that.”

“Get out of our way, Blondie,” snarls Steroid Boy. “The bitch and the dog are coming with us. Up to you if they come with us alive, or--”

He doesn't finish the sentence. Steve flings the shield, vertically, so it knocks hard into Steroid Boy's gun hand, smashing it out of the way of Darcy's head. Steve is already charging forwards, kicking out, planting his Nike sneaker in Steroid Boy's face and using it to push off from as he launches out to tackle the Grinning Idiot.

Grinning Idiot hits the floor, not grinning any more with 250 pounds of furious super-soldier on him, and lets go of Pingu. Pingu races into her crate and curls up in the back corner, as small as she can. “Darcy?” Steve says, his hand on Idiot's throat. “Anything I can use as handcuffs in here?”

“I, uh, wow, I, I'm not looking in his nightstand--”, she says, rubbing the back of her head where it hit the floor.

“Darcy, *not* the time--” Steve starts, but Steroid Boy lurches up then, scrabbling for his gun, and Steve lets go of Idiot long enough to stomp on Steroid Boy's already injured hand and then kick him hard in the liver. He goes down again.

He growls at Steroid Boy: “*Stay down*.” Then, to Darcy: “Duct tape or big cable ties, now!”

“Okayokaysorry”, Darcy says, then double-takes at her own hand when she sees blood all over it. She goes downstairs carefully, holding onto the rail with both hands, and Steve momentarily curses himself for sending the girl with the concussion to fetch things.

While she's downstairs, Steve hears a scream of surprise and the briefest of scuffles, the *thunk* of two heavy blows landing followed a second later by a loud, bone-crunching *spluk*, as if bodies falling off a roof. He glances up, out the front windows to across the street, to see James' muscular silhouette on the opposite rooftop. Scratch that, he thinks. Bodies *kicked* off a roof.

Darcy comes back with some industrial-strength cable ties and Steve binds the two gangsters' wrists and ankles. He's not gentle about it, and he's not sorry.

James walks in a moment later, silenced pistols still in his hands. He's filthy, covered in cuts, reeking of gunsmoke, and still strangely emotionless, and his beauty hits Steve like the sharp edge of a knife. He wants to drag James into the shower, or maybe even straight to bed, and kiss every bruise and cut on him. Wants to bring life back into those eyes, make them brighten and then go dark.

His eyes flick over to the two cuffed gangsters and Steve is about to say something when James pushes past him and executes both of them, Steroid Boy and Idiot, via single shots to the forehead.

Steve grabs James' shoulder and pulls him around, yelling “James, what the hell--” and there's the briefest of moments where James looks at *him* as a target, and then it's gone, and James looks away.

“Steve. They're *bratva*. They came into my home, attacked my dog, my friends,” James says, softly. “My world has rules. There is no mercy for them.” He sits down heavily onto the low, chrome-and-leather sofa nearby, and puts his guns on the coffee table. He slumps forwards, arms

on knees, and sighs a long, ragged sigh, shaking his head.

Pingu is the first one to join James on the sofa, positively bolting out of her crate and wiggling up next to him, nudging his arm until he circles it around her.

Darcy crawls on the sofa next and curls up, burying her head on James' shoulder. Her petticoat, torn and dirty now, rustles as she tucks her legs under herself. He reaches out an arm and draws her in close, about to kiss the top of her head when he notices the blood. "Daryushka..." he says.

"S'okay," Darcy says, her voice small, mascara and eyeliner smudged down her face. "I bumped my head on the floor but it's okay."

James grunts and pulls her a little further down on the sofa, so he can look at the wound. She's right; it isn't bad. He smooths her hair with his hand; tries to fix the mascara smudges on her cheeks.

Steve feels uncomfortable, not sure where he fits in with this strange little self-chosen family, all huddled together on the sofa with no room left for him. He sees the bullet holes across James' jacket; he knows kevlar may stop the puncture but the impact still hurts like a sonovabitch. He knows James is still bleeding from a leg wound; there are drops of blood trailing from the staircase to the sofa. All he wants to do is sweep James into his arms and take care of him, but James is with his family, and Steve doesn't want to interrupt.

Steve busies himself retrieving his shield from where it's embedded in the wall, and as he comes back with it James says to Darcy, "You should get out of here."

Darcy throws her arms around James. "Noooooo," she says.

But James carefully disentangles himself from her. "Police will come, Darcy. They will take me away, maybe for a while, maybe forever. I need you to take Pingu. And if I don't come back, this place is yours." He smiles at her, small and sad. "It would make a nice bakery."

Darcy screams out a half-sob, half shout of defiance, and grabs James' arm. She glares at Steve. "You can't let this happen. You have to stop this. They came to *kill* him, Steve--"

James makes a soft snort of amusement. "He can't fix this, Darcy."

Steve's brain spins. He's damn well going to try, though.

James pushes Darcy a little, almost playfully. "But you have to go home, Darcy."

Darcy folds her arms and draws into herself, small as she can on the sofa. "I don't want to go home. I'm *scared*. Please let me stay here. I need to know what happens to you."

James sighs and gets up, limping across the room to the kitchen, and pours himself a glass of water. There are sirens in the distance now, getting closer. "You have to stay upstairs, then."

Darcy nods and holds up two fingers. "Scout's honour," she says.

Steve looks up. "I'm going to say this was me. I did all this." He pulls out his phone. "I'm calling it in as an Avengers thing."

James rolls his eyes. "Steve. You don't carry a gun."

"I *could*."

“You don't carry a *Russian* gun. You also don't kill people.”

Steve sighs and leans on the kitchen island next to James. “I wish that were true. I really do.” He dials a number on his phone, the name saved in his contacts only as a single letter: *F*. “I'm going to call someone. He might be able to help.” He sticks his phone on speaker as it begins to ring.

James pulls a first-aid kit out of a kitchen cabinet and sits all the way up on the counter, bending his right leg so he can see the bullet wound in the calf. “There is no help,” he says, as he takes a set of forceps out of the kit. “I could run, but all my life is running, hiding, lying. I'm done.” He exhales as he puts the forceps in his wound and roots around for the bullet. It's painful even to watch, but James' face shows almost no expression. “Fucking Odessa assholes,” he mutters.

The phone is still ringing. Finally, Nick Fury picks up, and says, “Captain.”

Steve snatches up his phone and turns off speaker. “Nick! I really need your help. I have a, a situation with a friend. The local Russian mafia put a hit on him and... I need, I need him not to be arrested. It's important.”

“Actually we were just on our way over there. We picked up the reports on the police scanner and thought you might be involved. A little close to home, isn't it?”

“Yeah. *Yeah*. Coupla blocks,” Steve says, the tightness in his chest easing. SHIELD was coming. SHIELD would take care of it.

Steve hangs up his phone and smiles at James. “It's going to be okay. SHIELD's going to clean this up for us.”

“Who are they? The people in the grey vans?”

“Yes,” Steve says. “They're great. They did a lot for me, when I first came out of the ice. Really helped me find my feet.”

James doesn't look very convinced. He grunts once as he pulls the bullet free from his leg, then dumps it and the bloody forceps unceremoniously on the granite countertop. He quickly bandages the wound and then slides down off the counter, testing how much weight he can put on his leg.

The sirens are very close now.

James limps to the coffee table and grabs his pistols, jamming them into his thigh holsters.

“James. They're *friends*,” Steve says.

James shrugs as he limps to the staircase.

“Wait,” Steve says, and from the look James gives him, Steve can tell he thinks there's going to be an argument about the guns. But Steve just steps forwards and throws his arms around James, burying his face in James' neck. James freezes for a moment then hugs him back, hugs him hard, like it might be the last one they ever get. “I promise I'm going to make it okay,” whispers Steve. “You're, you're not going anywhere. I'm never going to let you go.”

James says nothing, but the force with which he's hugging Steve is all the words that are needed. They break apart after a moment. Steve grabs his shield with one hand, and holds out his other hand to James. “Let's go face the music,” he says.

They don't have to wait long before the grey vans pull up outside, sirens piercingly loud before they cut into silence, and the workshop echoes with the sound of a dozen people, *armed* people, striding through the front office towards them. More vans, more people can be heard on the street outside, cordoning it off, photographing and removing bodies. James carefully pulls his hand out of Steve's, and shifts to a stance that, while not a fighting stance, could very quickly become one.

Steve smiles at him, reaches a hand out to grip his shoulder reassuringly, but then freezes mid-motion, watching James. Because James is frozen, tilting his head slightly, as if he recognises a noise one of the people is making.

And then Nick Fury and Phil Coulson walk through the workshop door, an old man behind them. The man is heavy, and walks with a cane. His dark eyes under heavy brows immediately find James, and a smile comes over his face. It's not a pleasant thing to see.

Steve glances at James. James is terrified, pale and shaking, staring at the old man.

"Captain," Nick Fury begins. "Gotta ask you to step away from Barnes."

"What? No," Steve says, stepping closer to James, between him and the others. "Why?"

Fury gives Steve a tired look. "He's not a person. He's a weapon of mass destruction, and we are taking him in before he goes off." Behind Fury, ten SHIELD agents with heavy body armour and assault rifles spread out around the room, guns pointed at James.

Steve looks around, incredulous. "That's ridiculous, Nick. This is *all* ridiculous. He's not going to *go off*—"

"Oh?" Fury says, turning and glancing pointedly out towards the street, then back. "He's killed over fifty people in the past 24 hours. But maybe you wanna wait until he's hit an even hundred?"

"They were Hydra, and then a Russian mafia hit squad sent to kill him--" Steve says, stepping forwards, fists balled.

But a quiet voice cuts him off. "What is your name, soldier?" Phil Coulson asks.

"J-James Barnes," James says, staring at his feet. He's still death-pale, like he's seen a ghost.

"No," says Phil Coulson. "What is your *real* name?"

"Mikhail Pechorin," James replies.

The old man claps his hands together and says "*Soldatik*, on your knees!" and Steve gasps because it's like James is a puppet and the old man has cut his strings. James *drops*, like a scolded child, and holds his wrists up near the back of his head, as if to block a blow. James starts speaking in rapid-fire Russian, and the old man hobbles forwards and bends down, grabbing James' wrists with one hand and slapping him across the face with the other. "English!" he hisses. "Name, *soldatik*!"

"The hell is going on--" Steve grits out, but Fury is beside him, leading him away, whispering, "Just shut up. Let Karpov do his thing."

"Arkhangelsk Military Research Laboratory No 2, Experimental Weapon Batch 1, Number 7,"



stutters James, staring at the ground. "I am N-number 7."

Steve takes a step backwards, knocking over a stool. It falls onto the cement floor with a bang like an exploding bomb and Steve flinches. His eyes dart to James' arm, the robot arm tattoo, but it's covered by his jacket. But Steve with his perfect memory can picture the number on the inside of James' forearm, old and blue and a little sloppy, earlier than all the other tattoos: AMRL2EX01007. A lab ID number.

The old man, Karpov, strokes James' hair, like James is his pet dog. "What happened to 1-12, *soldatik*?"

"E-experiments unsuccessful. Subjects terminated," James says, his eyes never leaving a point on the ground an inch or so in front of his knees.

"And how did you survive?" Karpov asks. His tone is sickly-sweet, a twisted parody of affection. "I injected the poison into you myself."

"T-termination failed. Experiment successful," James says.

"Explain," Karpov says.

"I- I woke up in the hole you put us all in. Behind the playground. The others would not wake up. I tried to go back to my room but the lab was destroyed. So I waited by the entrance for you to come back. After a few days I got very hungry and followed the road to town. Some people in uniforms took me to the orphanage. They didn't know any of my command phrases so I didn't talk to them. I stayed there. I was very sick at puberty and then afterwards I was different. But I didn't tell anyone. People hate you when you're different."

Karpov smiles broadly and pats James on the head. "Ah, Seven. It was always you. I thought if any would work, it was you. So disobedient, but so much raw talent."

Karpov glances up at the room, and Coulson catches his eye, indicating the considerable arsenal strapped to James' body. Karpov nods, and taps James with his cane. "Seven, remove your weapons and disassemble them for cleaning."

James begins to do just that, mechanically, laying out everything in perfect, neat rows. No motion larger or smaller than it needs to be. Steve can't help but stare. It's as if James has no will of his own.

Karpov stands over James, behind him, watching him with a smug pride that Steve wants to smash off his face. "We engineered them to be at the peak of the human range for strength, reflexes, and intelligence." He leans down and catches James' chin with a finger, tilting James' face up for everyone to see. "And we made them pretty, because if we had to look at them all day they might as well be decorative." He smiles down at James, a low pleasure burning in his gut at how the skinny, fierce child of his laboratory has blossomed into the broad, masculine adult on his knees in front of him. "My pretty *soldatik*..."

Steve is going to be sick. He's going to be physically sick and/or he's going to kill someone. He slips his shield off his arm and leans on it. Things can't get worse.

But they do.

Karpov steps out from behind James and walks towards Coulson. "Then of course the serum on top of that. Did you know Seven could take down three fully armed men bare-handed by the age of eight?"

Okay, that's it. Steve has officially reached his limit. "Wait, you gave the serum to *children*!?"

Nick puts a warning hand on Steve.

Karpov looks at him like he's an idiot. "That was *without* the serum." Karpov sighs and throws his arms up. "Tchah, the Erskine-Zola serum. We could never make it work. It killed every adult volunteer we tried it on. And we tried *many*. So we thought to try to bond it to our subjects before puberty. Alas, it did nothing. Did not bond at all. Just made them sick for a few days after every shot."

"And how often did you deliberately make children sick by jacking them up with deadly, experimental drugs?" Steve hisses.

Karpov shrugs. "Every three months, starting from their fifth birthday. But due to a lack of results, the government chose to terminate the experiments when the children were 10. We were ordered to dispose of all organic laboratory material--"

"You mean the children. You mean you killed the children," says Steve.

Karpov gives him the *you're an idiot* look again, then glances back to James, who waits patiently on his knees, staring downwards, disassembled weapons in a neat half-circle in front of him. "Who were your parents, Seven?"

"My father was a petri dish and my mother was a pipette," James replies, tonelessly.

"Captain Rogers, these are not children" Karpov says, patronising. "They are just clones. Heavily modified clones, yes, but... not people. Things grown in a lab. We are not Baba Yaga, roaming the countryside, stealing babies."

Karpov chuckles to himself, positively bouncing on the balls of his feet. "We did it," he says. "I knew if we just waited for puberty the serum would manifest." The next words come out all in a tumble, a scientist finally receiving vindication for his theories. "We tried every variation on race, blood type, gender, genetics, anything we could think of. Seven, he was my idea. Mine. We made *him* from a sample dating from the same era and neighborhood as you, Captain Rogers, in case it was something about where and when you grew up that made the serum bind to you but no other."

"So you stole *dead* babies," Steve says, thinking of the name James chose for himself; of Bucky's grave with the archangel overlooking it. He racks his brain to recall what Bucky looked like; all that comes to mind is a mop of dark hair and a bright rascal's grin.

"We borrowed a little genetic material from bodies that were not using it any more," Karpov demurs.

"How can you look at that man and say he's not a person?" Steve counters, stepping closer.

Karpov calls back to James. "*Soldatik*, what are you?"

James' lips move, but no sound comes out.

Karpov walks over and prods James with his cane. "You are a weapon. You are a machine. Built by the Russian state. Owned by the Russian state. Machines do not tire. Machines do not fear. Repeat, Seven. What are you?"

"Okay, that's enough," Steve says, grabbing Karpov's arm and pulling him away from James. Steve bends and runs a hand down James' back. "James, get up. C'mon."

James doesn't move, or acknowledge him.

Steve lets go of his shield and slips an arm around James' chest. "C'mon. We're getting out of here." But James still won't move, and is dead weight against him. He could drop his shield and try to haul him up with both arms, but that doesn't seem--

Karpov sighs and snaps his fingers. "*Soldatik*, on your feet."

James stands up with the same flowing grace he brings to fighting, and Steve steps back, a cold sort of misery clutching at his stomach. "James, please--" he whispers.

Karpov looks over at Fury. "Where do you want him?"

"In the back of the containment van," Fury says. "We'll have to cuff him."

"It will be no problem," says Karpov. "Seven, follow."

"This is not happening," Steve says, picking up his shield again and stepping in front of Fury. "I'm not letting you take him." Steve runs his thumb along the rim of the shield, pressing against the thin vibranium edge hard enough to mark his skin.

"Follow," Karpov barks from near the door to the front office, and then repeats it in Russian, as he notices James has not yet moved. James nods and begins to walk. Karpov watches him, a look of annoyance on his face. His *soldatik* must behave perfectly, in front of the Americans who might be impressed enough to let him continue his work.

Steve watches James, his mind still reeling with the dissonance of this strapping, muscular warrior being ordered around like a child. James is almost to him now, soon he will walk past close enough to touch, and Steve's hands itch to reach out to him.

Then Steve thinks how James managed to live in perfect peace for two years, until... until Steve crash-landed in his life. That all of this is, all of James' misfortunes, have come about because of him.

James glances over at him right then, and gives him the smallest of smiles. It's almost... apologetic.

"You and I will discuss this in a moment, once Barnes is secured," Fury is saying.

Steve groans and tears his eyes from James. "Nick, James doesn't need to be *secured*."

Of course, that's when James lunges forwards, grabs Steve's shield out of his hand, and flings it at Karpov.

Karpov is dead before he hits the ground, his skull just about cloven in two by the shield.

The SHIELD agents with assault rifles run in, shouting, and circle James, and Fury is grabbing Steve, pulling him backwards and Steve needs to see James, to get him safe, but they won't let him, they're all shouting, and James isn't fighting, he's just curled up on the ground on his side, hugging his knees.

A female agent pulls a small dart gun filled with green substance out of her pocket, and fires it at James. The dart embeds in his neck, and he goes still.

"What the hell is that?" yells Steve. "What have you done?"

"Relax, Cap. It's just a tranquilizer," Fury smiles. "The same one we developed for use on you."

Then Fury pulls the trigger on the dart gun in *his* hand.

And everything goes black.

\* \* \*

Steve wakes up in his bed, in his own apartment.

Nick Fury is sitting in an easy chair in a corner of the room, the one Steve normally throws his clothes on. “Morning,” he says. “Sorry about having to do that. We were running out of choices.”

Steve sits up fast, and angry. Which is a mistake. His head feels like it has a lead bowling ball in it, smashing against the sides of his skull if he moves too fast. “You have no idea how sorry you're going to be,” hisses Steve.

Fury holds up a hand. “I know you're mad. And I know you and Barnes are... close. But you gotta look at it from my point of view, Cap. I can't just have an illegal Russian super-soldier running around the US doing whatever he wants. Barnes can't be a free agent. He has to pick a side. Which means, he's either with us, or he's against us. You may not agree with my methodology, but I'm orchestrating a set of circumstances in which he'll make the *correct* choice.”

“Oh?” Steve says, his voice dripping with scorn. “I'm sure he'll be leaping to join you after today.”

Fury crosses his legs and leans back in the chair. “Different things work with different people, Cap. Some people,” and here he indicates Steve, “need to feel wanted. Barnes, well, we bugged his apartment. He wants to be protected. He wants to be what he is, and he wants you. We can give him all of these things. We are the *only* people who can give him all of these things.”

But Steve isn't listening any more. He hasn't listened since Fury made that remark about being wanted. His mind has darted back to three years ago, to when he was first brought out of the arctic ice. He'd been listless and confused in New York, *timesick*, and Fury had offered him the use of a cabin near a SHIELD training base in the Catskills. To give him some time to collect himself, Fury had said. And Steve had agreed, thinking it a kind offer. They'd sent him up there with a selection of civilian clothes and some SHIELD workout gear, sweats and tees, in case he needed them. And his shield, because it was pretty much his only belonging at that point.

The cabin had been lovely, on a wooded hillside overlooking a pond, near a great dirt running track that would take him down around the base and back up again. In the quiet of the early morning, he could hear the cadences of the platoons as they did their dawn runs. A few of the cadences were even familiar.

In the quiet of the morning, he could also hear the shooter. And the screaming. He'd gotten down to the base in a matter of minutes, shield on his arm, and subdued the terrorist. He'd been told it was someone from an organization called Ten Rings, and Steve had signed up on the spot to go back to active duty.

Now, in his bed in Red Hook, he looks up at Nick Fury. “The terrorist. Did he exist? Or was he just the right set of circumstances.”

Fury smiles, sphynxlike, and waves an enigmatic hand. “The two are not mutually exclusive.”

Translation: his past was a lie. The reason he was fighting, right now, *still*, was a lie.

“Cap, before you get your panties in a twist, read this file.” Fury pulls out the Karpov file and tosses it on the bed. As Steve picks it up, the way you might pick up a dead rattlesnake, Fury continues, leaning forwards, arms on knees. “They did all *sorts* of things to these kids. Diminished empathy. In fact, overall diminished emotion. Your boy killed dozens of people, did he at any point look like he even remotely gave a shit?”

Steve grits his teeth and stares down at the old, faded file in his hands. It's fat with paper; he is gripping it so hard his knuckles are white. He looks up at Fury, and when he talks his words are quiet, pushed out from between clenched teeth. “Ever since I met James, everyone has been telling me what to think about him. Yet not a single one of you have actually spoken to him. Gotten to know him. *I have*. And I can say unequivocally, you can take your observations and your suspicions and your nasty little accusing files and you can *shove them up your ass*.”

With that, Steve rips the Karpov file in half and flings its torn pieces at Fury. Fury leans back, a flicker of surprise on his face, soon subsumed into his usual icy demeanour.

As the torn pages flutter down around him, Fury says. “You know the fastest way to get him back is to help him come to the right decision.”

“He already made the right decision, Nick! He was out of the game.” Steve says. He gets up, propping himself against the wall as the room spins around him.

“Newsflash, Cap,” Fury growls. “When you sign up to be a super-soldier, you lose the right to opt out of the game.”

Steve shouts. “He. Never. Signed. Up.” He regrets it instantly, the volume hitting his head like hammers. His next words are somewhere closer to a whisper. “I did. Fine. I get it. Steve Rogers, property of the US government, now and forever. But not him. Not. Him.”

Fury sighs, and gets up, smoothing his long, dark duster coat around him. “Steve. You're lucky we're even affording him any rights at all. He's a lab-grown clone. Under both US and Russian law, he is not a person.”

“Then the laws are *wrong*,” Steve snarls. “It won't be the first time. Hell, when I went into the ice you wouldn't have been allowed to marry a white woman.”

Fury's voice has an edge of pure steel as he walks out Steve's door. “I'll talk to you later, Cap, when you've got your head screwed on a bit more right about this.”

\* \* \*

Steve drinks about a gallon of water then stumbles over to Red Star. The shop's big wooden double doors are locked tight, the street silent. Aside from a few bullet holes in various buildings, barely visible unless you know what you're looking for, it's as if nothing ever happened-- he checks his phone-- yesterday. Nothing happened yesterday.

He slips into the alley and through the side door. “Darcy?” he calls.

There's the bang of an oven being slammed shut. “Up here,” she shouts back.

Steve goes up. Darcy is a mess. There are about six dozen cookies cooling in racks around James' kitchen. She's still wearing the same clothes as the day before, the dirty day-dress with the torn crinoline, dried blood matted in her hair, the remains of her makeup smudged all over her face.

“Stress baking?” he says.

“Stress *burning*,” she snuffles, waving her hand at the cookies which, Steve can now tell, really shouldn't be that hard and dark. “I'm failing at everything.”

No, I am, Steve thinks. I'm the one who took this amazing, shy, gorgeous man and systematically destroyed his life. But instead of saying that, Steve just opens his arms and Darcy shuffles over and flops against him. “How much did you hear?” he asks. “When they took him.”

“All of it,” Darcy sobs. “Everyone's been so horrible to him his entire life and he's still the nicest person I've ever met. You know how many fucking people just walked past me when I was homeless? Fucking all of them, except James.” Darcy fists her hands into the sleeves of Steve's shirt and clings. “And now they've taken him away.”

“Darcy,” Steve says, bending down slightly to rest his forehead against hers, to make her look him in the eyes. “I swear to you one thing, and I swear it on my mother's grave. *I will free James.*”

His voice drops to a growl. “SHIELD won't get to use him like they used me.”

## Chapter End Notes

ugh, slightly rushed chapter as pro work is crazy hectic right now and I'm leaving for NYC in about four hours (at 6am yay)

But! Super extra special treat this week as my main SBB artist, [Rohkeutta](#), not only gifts us with the gorgeous cover image for this chapter but also A PLAYLIST!!!!

Here is [the LUCKY SEVEN playlist on Spotify](#) ....and [here it is on 8tracks!](#)

Also, in case you want an idea of how I picture James' body in this, [here you go \(warning: mildly NSFW\)](#). (You should all follow Michael Stokes on tumblr because so many hot photos)

Also also, biiiiiike porn (it warms the cockles of my charred, tarry heart that so many of you dig the bikes)! Triumph is a British make I adore; [here's a Rocket III](#) which, if that doesn't scream *ride me* to you, we need to have words.





# Rhyming & Stealin'

## Chapter Summary



art by [JustGot1](#); available on cool stuff via [their Redbubble](#). [Check it!](#)

All for one, and one for all.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Steve stares out his bedroom window; has been staring out of his window for the past hour, brain numb but functioning, turning over options with a cold, dispassionate inevitability. He watches the long shadows of a summer Saturday afternoon slide further down the Red Hook street; sees people ambling past down below, people whose lives hadn't just exploded in their faces, whose hearts hadn't been torn asunder. That morning, he and James had made love not two feet from where he was sitting. At midday, he had watched James singlehandedly take apart an entire Russian mob hit squad. And then James was gone, tranquilized and taken Lord only knows where by SHIELD, to be manipulated into service the same way Steve had been.

He becomes dimly aware of a sound in his apartment and realises it's his phone, and it's been



ringing for some time. He fumbles around for his phone and finally finds it on the sofa, under his shield. "H'lo?" he mumbles.

"Steve. What's wrong." It's Tony.

"Nothing."

"Steve. I was calling to see if you and the Red Menace wanted to build bikes this afternoon, but it's taken you three calls to pick up and you sound like... oh shit, have you two had a fight?"

"No," Steve sighs. "Tony... let me call you back." His eyes sweep the top corners of his apartment. Would SHIELD have bugged his place? He'd like to think not, but a little voice in the back of his head demurs: *Almost definitely*. So he climbs up to the building's flat roof and hits the top number in Recent Calls.

"Yoho," Tony says. Steve can hear tinkering in the background; Tony's in his lab.

"Okay, so... SHIELD took James," Steve says.

"What? Why?" Tony asks. The background sound of tools on metal stops abruptly. "Also, you're not in your apartment any more, are you? Because I bet SHIELD's bugged the living shit out of it."

"No, I'm on the roof."

"Good man. Now, spill."

Steve exhales, long and ragged. Where does he even begin? "A *bratva* hit squad showed up to kill James today. They failed. But SHIELD are using it as an excuse to bring James in because... because it turns out James is the Russian version of me. He's, he's a super-soldier." And Steve still feels a little jolt of electricity, or maybe it's adrenaline, through his groin when he says that.

Tony is silent for a good three seconds. It feels like an eternity. It practically is, in Tony-time. "Hokeydoke," Tony breathes. "On the one hand, hooray, called it, still the smartest, I knew something was up with him. On the other, *holy fucking shit, Steve*, and why isn't the Russian government freaking out about this?"

Steve sags against the bricks of the stairwell enclosure, watching a group of three pigeons settle on the roof's low edge-wall. "The Russian government don't know. He's hidden himself, his *abilities*, all these years. The programme he was part of, it was considered a failure and they thought they killed all the participants. Who were children, Tony. *Children*."

"Everyone is gross and I want to die," says Tony quietly.

"Yep," breathes Steve.

Tony sighs, and Steve can hear pacing, and something being picked up. "So what are we going to do?"

Steve frowns. "I am going to do something everyone is going to regret, and the Avengers need plausible deniability. So *you're* not going to do anything, Tony."

"Like hell I'm not, Capsicle. This isn't an Avengers thing. I am your friend. Fuck knows I'm not very good at it, but you got me, and if you want to go do something stupid, I am there for you. Besides, stupid is my main area of expertise, after mechanical engineering. Irony, for a genius, but there you go."

Steve doesn't feel like smiling, but Tony's words cause the sides of his mouth to twitch upwards anyway. "Thanks, Tony. There is something you could do for me. I'll, I'll email you the details. It's actually more of a Pepper thing..."

"Ohhh," Tony responds, in a mock-injured voice. "You only love me for my wife." A brief pause, then he mumbles, "It's okay. I only love me for my wife, too." Something clanks heavily in the lab, and Tony swears under his breath. "But yeah, sure, anything. We'll do it. Gotta ask, though: on a scale from one to Azzano, how epically stupid are we talking?"

Steve stands up and rolls his shoulders back. The pigeons, frightened, clatter off into the afternoon sky. "Tony, you have no idea."

\* \* \*

Steve has a second call to make, but he needs to wait until Sunday to make it. Rushing things would weaken his overall strategy. So after emailing Tony, he mopes around his apartment for the rest of the evening and stares at the TV while movies play, not taking them in at all, his mind full of James. He knows there's no chance of his sleeping that night, but he needs the time to fucking *pass*, and he needs to not be exhausted on Sunday and Monday. So he digs into the back of his medicine cabinet, where the jar of sleeping tablets that Bruce designed for him rest. Three of them black him out for a good eight hours, and though he feels muzzy the next morning, it is the next morning, and now only a few hours are left between him and the next step in his plan.

Those hours are spent doing prosaic things: laundry; a run; trying not to crawl out of his own skin; a trip to a local diner for waffles. Natasha texts him during breakfast.

NAR: ?

NAR: just keep me informed, ok

SGR: wilco

Steve waits until just after noon. Then he makes a pot of the smoky tea he bought; the tea that reminds him of James. (The way he tastes; smoke and strawberries.) Mug firmly in hand, expression schooled, he sits down at his kitchen table and calls Nick Fury.

\* \* \*

They let him see James on Monday morning. SHIELD are holding him across the river, somewhere desolate and industrial near Jersey City, in a large facility with several supermax cells meant to hold people like him. Steve had known it as the SHIELD facility with the shooting range; Clint had taken him there a couple times. He'd never realised about the cells. And it made him wonder what else SHIELD was hiding. Who was sitting, imprisoned in those boxes, while he and Clint and Natasha larked about on the range.

Steve gets there half an hour early. He wears his uniform, but not his helmet. Fury shakes his hand and smiles and says how glad he is that Steve understands the situation, that Steve is willing to help. Steve smiles back, the Good Soldier.

Fury hands him off to a chatty female SHIELD agent, who takes him down and down through a myriad of corridors and security doors. Steve keeps up an easy banter with her, even flirts a little. It doesn't escape Steve's attention that they're shadowed by a couple of guys from the SHIELD strike force, Rollins and... the other guy's name begins with R too. Ugly, bitter-looking man. Never liked him. He'd dig through his mind for it, but he's too busy watching his SHIELD chaperone's hands as she punches keycodes into doors.

Then, finally, the last door, and they're on a balcony, in a space the size of an aircraft hanger. In the middle of it, suspended in the air, is what looks like a plexiglass box. Well, not a box: a plexiglass room. A corner of it is blocked off as a bathroom; the lower half of the plexi is opaqued out there. The entrance is at the top, a sealed hatch 20 feet above the cell's floor. It resembles nothing so much as a giant fishbowl.

Inside that fishbowl is James, watching them. They've got him in an orange jumpsuit, stretching in odd places over his muscular frame. He's barefoot, and he has thick cuffs on his wrists, linked together with a short chain. He looks... oddly calm. That's what breaks Steve in the end. That James isn't stressed or upset at being incarcerated. That something inside James has just rolled over and said *this is where I belong*. As if he knows that experiments – machines; weapons – always go back in their box eventually.

Steve feels like his whole body is on fire. He's burning with about four different emotions at that moment and he can't show a damn one of them. "I can have some privacy?" Steve asks his chaperone.

She opens the gate to the catwalk that leads to the cell. "Fifteen minutes, Captain Rogers." The two Strike Team goons take up position on either side of the door.

Steve nods and smiles and paces calmly along the narrow metal catwalk. His eyes sweep around the room; there's a big, opaque rectangle of black glass inset into the wall at his right. It has a perfect view of the cell and its visitors. Steve snorts to himself. So much for privacy.

James steps closer to the plexiglass, angling towards a circular area of the wall pierced by small air-holes, as Steve comes near. His eyes are blank; vague. It's as if he's not quite home. And all Steve wants to do is break down that horrible clear wall and kiss the spark back into him, mess him up until he can tease that sly smirk out of him, those bone-dry sarcastic asides. Anything other than this... *surrender*.

But instead he just says, "Hey." Then he leans his forehead against the plexi. It's almost a foot thick. SHIELD are not taking chances. Then he says, "Darcy and Pingu are okay. Darcy's stress-baking."

James shuffles closer and leans his head against the plastic too, trying to touch, or at least feel Steve's warmth through the glass. He puts his palms, as best he can given the cuffs that severely restrict his range of motion, against the fishbowl wall. When Steve puts his gloved hands up to match, James smiles a little, and closes his eyes.

"How are you doing?" Steve asks, quietly. Then, because he can't hold it back any longer, he continues: "I'm sorry, James. I... I came into your life, and destroyed it."

James shakes his head slightly, and makes shushing sounds. When he speaks, it's barely above a

whisper. "It's okay, Steve. I got to be a person for a long time." Then there's that ghost-smile again, the shy, fragile beginnings of happiness on his face. It makes Steve's heart just about crack into pieces. "I feel like I got away with something. I even got to fall in love. Twenty years I shouldn't have had... that the others didn't get."

Steve feels a tear drip down his cheek, and he scratches with a gloved hand at the plexi, in desperation. So close, and so far from James. It's going to kill him.

"You told them no?" Steve asks.

James nods, the motion small, hair falling down across his face. Steve's hand itches with the desire to brush it away, but he can't. He can't do anything. "I will die before I'm... *owned* again," James breathes, so quietly that only another super-soldier could hear.

"What do you want to do? If you could choose," Steve says, and it's like a knife to his gut that James *can't* choose. That he isn't *allowed*.

There's the ghost-smile again. "What I've wanted since the day you walked into my shop. To race bikes, and make love to you."

Steve makes a low, rough sound of despair, and steps away from the cell to catch his breath. He keeps one hand on the wall but turns away, away from the obsidian rectangle of glass from behind which the SHIELD bosses watch him. They don't get this. They don't get to see how he feels right now.

James hits his heavy metal cuffs against the plexi, to get Steve's attention. Steve looks up and James is glaring at him. James plants both of his palms on the cell wall and his demeanour has totally transformed. No longer is he slumped against the wall, passive. He's leaning forwards, shoulder and bicep muscles straining against the badly-fitted jumpsuit, that panther's body like a tensely coiled spring.

"Steve," he growls. "I do not regret a single moment I have spent since I met you. Do not disrespect this by thinking I would have been better off without you. I would not. End of discussion." James' eyes dart over to the glass window, and back again. They're narrow, and calculating. Steve feels like James wants to say more, but is all too conscious that everything he says and does is likely being recorded in triplicate, via video feed, by SHIELD.

Steve doesn't even have to pretend to be overcome with emotion. He slips off his gloves and puts his right hand, now bare, against the glass, a little off centre from James', so James has to move his left hand up to cover Steve's. Which he does, after a brief flick of pale eyes down to Steve's palm. James' face remains admirably blank.

"So, I've actually had a pretty wonderful time working for SHIELD," Steve says, still quietly. His left hand, also now bare, remains curled at his side. "They were very good to me when I came out of the ice. Helped me figure out what I wanted."

"Mm," says James. It's disinterested; noncommittal. And perfect.

"All I'm saying is, maybe consider their offer. We could work together. And you could come home. I want you home, James."

"You really think they are okay?" James asks, a touch of amazement creeping into his voice.

Steve smiles. His war-bond selling, Hitler-punching smile. "I think they are the absolute best at what they do. Just like I'm the best at what I do."

“Time's up, Captain,” calls the female SHIELD chaperone from the balcony.

Steve uncurls his left hand and uses it to pull his glove onto his other hand. Then he presses his left palm against the glass in a gesture of farewell. James smiles at him and places his hand over it.

“Just think about what I've said, okay?”

James nods. “I will. I... need a few days, though.”

Steve tugs his other glove on as he crosses the catwalk. He feels light, as if he could float away. Nothing matters any more. It's all going to burn and he doesn't care.

On the way out, he asks to use a restroom. The Strike Team duo do not follow him in, thankfully.

He washes his hands carefully afterwards, eliminating all trace of the words *PLAY ALONG* and *WEDNESDAY* from where he had scrawled them on his palms in smudged black ballpoint.

He's just out of the Holland Tunnel and making his way towards the Battery when his phone chirps to life. He pulls up to a stoplight and taps the comms unit in his ear. “Rogers,” he says.

“Um... Steve? Uh, it's Darcy. I'm at the shop? And so are five scary Russian dudes who say they're Winter's brothers? Whatever that means?” Darcy hisses into the phone. “Steve, what should I do?”

Steve grins. “Give them cookies.”

The light changes, and he guns the bike. “I'll be right over.”

\* \* \*

Red Star's heavy wooden front doors are closed and locked, and a neat sign taped to them saying the shop was currently on summer vacation. Steve slips down the alley and, as expected, the side door to the workshop is open.

Inside are five men, one dog, and no Darcy. The men are all the sort of fit, late-20s/early 30s types in jeans and hoodies that you could pass on the street and never give another look at. Unless you yourself were a soldier, and saw how they all arranged themselves to be in clear sight lines of all windows and exits. How their apparent casual postures still hold an element of stiffness, of wariness.

Except for the big one, with the very Asian eyes and complexion, that's sitting cross-legged on the floor mumbling Russian babytalk at an utterly delighted Pingu. Pingu is grunting away in response and has one back foot twitching the way dogs do when you scratch just the right spot on their belly. Steve can see the black cat tattoo, a match to the one on James' right shoulder, that climbs up the Asian guy's forearm.

The rest watch him, evaluating. Steve notices that all of James' weapons have been reassembled and holstered, and are lying in a tidy pile on the workbench. And he can see black cats peeking above waistbands, snarling down shoulders, creeping across forearms. He suddenly feels like he's intruding on *their* world.

Finally, the smallest guy, all freckles and curly auburn hair and green-eyed, wiry determination, speaks up. “You're his boyfriend,” he says. “I saw the photo of you together.”

“Yeah, I am,” Steve says, keeping his distance. Then he holds his finger up, pulls out his phone and types. He holds the screen up so the freckled kid (because he does look like a kid) can read it: THIS PLACE IS BUGGED.

The kid gives Steve a look of disdain that he's *definitely* seen James use before, and points to a small pile of crushed metal on the workbench near James' arsenal. “Not anymore,” he says.

At that point, Darcy kicks the side door open, balancing two trays of coffee. Today, she's in a long, flowy burgundy chiffon dress in a flower print, her big clompy wooden sandals, and her long hair is braided. And she's furious. “Steve!” she shouts, as Steve hurries to help her with the coffee, “James *lied* to me.”

As soon as Steve takes one of the trays, she gestures operatically with her free hand, pointing to the workshop's little kitchen. “He *lied* about the tea!” Then another sweeping gesture, taking in the five soldiers, a couple of whom are giggling, the others looking to the freckled kid for translation, which he provides in a low whisper. “*They* drink Starbucks, like *normal* people. Not yucky tea that tastes like it's been brewed in Satan's ass-crack.”

The freckled kid's shoulders are shaking with mirth, and he can't translate for a moment, he just fans himself with one hand.

Darcy grabs a venti cup from her tray, putting the rest of the drinks down on the workbench. “I'll just be upstairs, baking the best damn carrot muffins you've ever tasted, and drinking *coffee*, the beverage choice of the not-insane.” She gets halfway up the steps then calls out, “Pingu?”. Pingu thumps her tail against the floor but makes no effort to roll off her back, away from the big soldier's ministrations. “Traitor,” Darcy sniffs, before disappearing upstairs.

Steve looks down at the names on the cups. “Um, so who's Piotr?” he says.

The freckled kid walks over. “Me,” he says. He gently but firmly budes Steve away from the trays of drinks, which is not a mean feat considering the kid can't be much taller than 5'6”, and starts handing out the cups. He says everyone's name then glances at Steve, to make sure Steve gets it. “Ivan,” he says, passing a coffee to a tall, gangly, dark-haired guy with a nick out of one ear and a black cat on the side of his abdomen. “Driver. Safecracker. And radio operator. He speaks English, too. The rest, not so much.” Ivan raises the cup in salute and goes back to perch on the stool he'd claimed earlier.

Next is the big Asian guy, who smiles all the time like he's the nicest guy you've ever met, or a homicidal maniac, or maybe a little of both. “Dmitri. Demolitions.” Dmitri levers himself up from Pingu duty and walks over, with a peculiar, rolling gait. “The mob boss who ordered the hit on Misha, his estate in Glen Cove... yesterday there was a gas leak. Very tragic. Whole house exploded,” Piotr explains, handing a cup to Dmitri, who just says “boom!” and then giggles to himself all the way back to Pingu, whole body quivering with happiness.

Next is a broad blond with big ears, a broken nose, and a gap between his front teeth. “Nikolai. Heavy machine gun. Hacking, with Arseny.” Then the oldest, who must be about 35, his nearly-shaved brown hair peppered with grey, especially in front where one patch blooms white. His brown eyes are hooded, with permanent dark circles under them, and Steve gets a deep feeling of untrustworthiness from him... until the man smiles at Piotr and those eyes wrinkle up in happiness. “Arseny. Pilot. Computers, with Kolya. Also good with poison.”

Then Piotr looks over at Steve and raises his own cup. “And me. Forgeries. Spotter for Misha when sniping.”

There's one cup left; Steve sees it has his name on it and grabs it gratefully. "Steve Rogers," he says. "Part-time national icon. Tactics, and shield."

Piotr snorts. "We know who you are."

"So, uh," Steve says, blowing on his coffee. "How did you know about James getting captured?"

"We have a system arranged, in case any of us is truly in trouble. The girl—" and Piotr indicates upstairs, *Darcy*, "—she texted me the code on Saturday."

Steve is about to say, *oh*, when Piotr's brows draw together. "How could you let this happen?" he says, voice sharp.

Steve groans and slumps down onto the nearest stool. He rakes a hand through his hair. "How... how much do you know about James?" he asks.

Piotr looks at Steve, assessing, for a long minute. Nikolai elbows Ivan, who translates, quietly, for the rest, and there's a short discussion back and forth in Russian. Then Ivan looks up and, in heavily-accented English, says, "Tell him."

Piotr sighs, and pokes at a hole in his dark-green shirt. "We know he is... *special*. We fought alongside him." Piotr wrinkles his freckled nose. "He hid it for the first year. Slowed down, pulled his punches, missed occasionally. To the point where he was very good, but not *suspiciously* so. But, of course, you get a good sergeant who is also the best sniper in Zaslon? You don't ask questions, you just be grateful. So what if he eats like a horse."

Ivan speaks up again. "Then we were pinned down in--"

Piotr cuts him off with a wave: "--somewhere classified. Urban combat; what was left of a small city after three years of fighting." He sighs. "There are the days you never expect to get through alive, and then there is the moment you *know*, without a shadow of a doubt, you will die. We had so little ammunition left. Air support was... *pfft*. Doing things more important than us. We are six of us, a few dozen bullets, Arseny's grandfather's bayonet, and then we hear the sound of heavy armour. Around a shelled-out building comes three big mechs. Robot war suits, bought black market from Latveria. And the enemy were using them to slaughter all of the Russian troops."

"It's the time in a bad fight when you look at your brothers to say, I am proud to die alongside you this day," Ivan continues, his voice soft. "The mechs prepare a final assault to clean us out. I remember the whirr of M134s warming up, aiming at us... And then Winter swears under his breath, rolls his shoulders, and jumps over the fucking sandbags. Before then, I thought I could fight well." Ivan shakes his head. "That day, I learned I was nothing."

"He destroys the mechs," says Piotr. "All he has is Arseny's bayonet, and a knife."

"We go up to him afterwards, Winter, what the fuck, and he is shaking and has his arms around himself and he only says, *I can do things*, and he is crying. *Please don't tell anyone*." Ivan wipes his hand over his face. "First of many times he saved our lives."

"It's why we left Zaslon together to go to the *bratva*," says Piotr. "We keep Winter's secret; he keeps us alive."

"Also he is idiot," says the blond one, the one they call Nikolai or Kolya.

Piotr shoots Nikolai a brief glare, then turns his green eyes back on Steve, gesturing with his hands as he talks. "Also, he is a softhearted idiot who thinks he has to rescue everyone he comes across,

that because he can heal from any pain he can take on everyone else's."

"Yup," comes Darcy's voice from above. She's sitting on the staircase, chin on the rail, her legs stuck out from between the bannisters like a little girl, venti cup of java still dangling from her fingers. Then, at Steve's surprised expression, she squawks, "What, like I wasn't going to listen in on this? Bitch please."

"So," Piotr says. "How do they have him? *Where* do they have him?"

Steve explains, and Ivan translates, while Piotr just looks more and more upset.

"No, no, no, this is bad," Piotr says when Steve finishes. "They won't feed him enough and it makes his head bad if he is starving. And if he can't move, it's even worse, he needs to move around, his body needs it. Otherwise--"

Steve holds up a hand. "Trust me, I know all these things. Probably better than anyone else on Earth."

"And yet you *sit* here," says Piotr, the edge in his voice unmistakeable.

"Don't mistake patience and strategy for idleness," Steve countered, steel creeping into his voice as well. He crosses his arms and leans against James' workbench and waits.

Finally, Piotr bites. "What is your plan?" he asks.

"One that would be considerably easier with skilled backup," Steve smiles. "If that backup can promise to attempt non-lethal shots only."

The five Russians mutter to each other and Ivan nods. "We will try."

"Okay, then. I was also promised carrot muffins," Steve says, looking up at Darcy.

\* \* \*

Most of Tuesday is spent either on the phone with Pepper, or running in to Manhattan to Avengers Tower for meetings with her. He feels guilty for stealing the CEO of a major corporation for several days of complex, delicate work, but Pepper just waves a manicured hand at him. "Shush, Steve. This is the most interesting thing I've done all year," she demurs.

Unfortunately, on one trip, Natasha corners him in the elevator. She stops it, then glares at him until he babbles out what he plans to do the following day. She grunts, starts the elevator again, and gets off at the next floor.

Then Wednesday dawns, overcast and windy. Steve drives his Harley out to the SHIELD facility, and is given the same group of three babysitters he had been on Monday: the blonde female chaperone, and the two Strike Team goons, Rumlow and Rollins. Fury is there to greet him, and raises an eyebrow at the shield strapped to Steve's back.

"Sorry," Steve blushes. "I have a PR thing right after this and they want me to show up in--" he gestures at his bright uniform and sighs, "--the whole monkey suit." He starts to unstrap the shield. "If you want, I can leave this out here..?"



Fury shakes his head. "It's fine. So you think you can convince him to join?"

"I'm going to do my best," says Steve.

"Good," says Fury, wandering back towards the elevators to his upper-floor office. "You two could be quite a team, you know."

Steve's babysitters lead him through all the corridors again, down and up again and across, until finally he's in the big hangar room with the plexiglass fishbowl glowing bright in midair in its centre. The only colour in the huge, dark room is the orange of James' jumpsuit, illuminated by the white glow of the cell.

James is already standing by the wall when Steve begins the long walk acrossed the pierced-metal catwalk to him. He's still cuffed, and Steve comes to the horrible realisation that they've kept him in those heavy metal cuffs the entire time. James looks a mess, hair touselled and matted, unwashed, dark circles under his eyes. His body still looked the same: broad shoulders and thick arms straining at the ill-fitting orange jumpsuit, narrowing to rock-hard abs and a racer's thighs. The serum took care of the body, Steve knew now. But Piotr was right: the mind was something else entirely. Steve knew full well that SHIELD didn't care about the mind, as long as they could point the body wherever they wanted.

"How are you holding up?" Steve says, just to say something. He can see full well that the answer is *pretty damn badly*.

James shrugs. "I don't know what to do," he says. He looks over his shoulder at the cell; a single piece of super-thick plexi, with a few airholes and then a hatch at the top, almost 15' over his head. "It's a good tactic, leaving a person alone in a cell like this. It's... effective."

"Yeah," Steve breathes. "SHIELD are good at manipulating people. At figuring out their w--"

But then an alarm on Steve's phone goes off; a quiet chime. He pulls his phone out of a pouch on his belt and glances down at it.

"Okay," Steve says. "Duck."

"What?" says James.

Then the explosion hits.

A perfect shaped charge blows a circular hole in the ceiling and first, the blown portion falls and hits the top of the cell with the force of a truck, shaking the whole fishbowl on its suspending cables. Steve manages to keep standing, barely, but James is thrown to the floor of the cell. As he gets up, three sets of feet land on the top of the cell.

"Hey boss," Dmitri says, grinning and wiggling his fingers as he looks down from the roof at James.

There are many things Steve wants to forget, but the grin that spreads across James' face like sunshine when he sees the men from his old unit is something he wants to hold fresh in his mind's eye for the rest of his days.

Piotr slaps Dmitri on the shoulder. “Dima, come on, the hatch,” he says. Nikolai throws a quick salute in James' direction as he draws an assault rifle and points it towards the catwalk.

The Strike Team guards are running down it, drawing weapons, shouting into walkie-talkies. Steve unslings his shield and in one fluid movement sends it hurtling towards them. The front one, Rollins, gets it full in the chest and flies backwards into Rumlow, his pistol falling out of his hand and clattering to the floor below, as the shield rebounds off a handrail and returns to Steve's hand.

Steve hears Nikolai firing off a few shots above him, and watches the blonde chaperone standing near the exit door dodge and rethink her plan of following Rumlow and Rollins onto the catwalk. The blonde swears and draws a pistol, lining up for a shot. Nikolai shoots her in the shoulder and she goes down.

By this point Dmitri has opened the hatch and Steve glances over his shoulder to see James bend his knees and make a standing jump up to grab the edge of the hatch, metal cuffs and all. He swings, and bunches his arm muscles, and levers himself up through the hatch onto the roof. He's immediately dogpiled into hugs by Piotr and Dmitri; Nikolai even glances up and punches him in the thigh to say hello.

Steve shakes his head and smiles to himself. Fury was wrong. He and James would make a terrible team. James was just too... distracting. Very, *very* distracting.

Which is how Rumlow manages to shoot him in the guts.

Steve cries out and slumps against the wall of the cell, dark blood smearing down the clear plexi. The world goes dark at the edges; as that darkness closes in on him all he can hear is James' inhuman howl of fury from above him.

\* \* \*

Arseny and Ivan peek out from behind a storage unit towards the SHIELD base's helipad. Several quinjets and a chopper are arranged in a semicircle, which is what they expected.

The lack of guards? That's... not so expected.

They dart out to the cover of the nearest quinjet and... still no guards. The two soldiers exchange worried glances, and Ivan shrugs.

Then, from above them, comes a silky, low female voice, speaking in Russian. “<Hi, boys.>”

Ivan twists out from cover and raises his pistol, sighting down it at the legendary Black Widow. She is sitting cross-legged on the top of their quinjet, calmly munching sushi from a take-away box. There is a small scuff of dirt on one of her perfect cheekbones.

“<You'll want to use that one,>” she says, pointing daintily with her chopsticks at the next quinjet in the row. “<Unfortunately the others all have... unexpected mechanical problems.>”

“<Ah, what a shame,>” says Ivan.

“<Indeed,>” says Natasha.

Arseny clears his throat as Ivan rolls his eyes and grabs at his sleeve. “<Uh, we are sorry for the whole...>” he makes a gesture towards his abdomen, “<...shooting you,>” he finishes, blushing furiously.

“<It's okay. I'm over it,>” Natasha shrugs. She returns to her sushi.

\* \* \*

James twists towards the chunk of ceiling that had landed on the cell, and smashes his cuffs down on it again and again until he shatters the chain pinning his hands together. He moves to grab Nikolai's rifle but Piotr intercepts him, offering him the handles of his two silenced Gyurza pistols. James only takes one. He'll need the other hand for Steve.

Rumlow is laughing; he has a remote control in his hand and he presses it, watching as a strong electric current courses through the cuffs and into James. "SHIELD wouldn't put a rabid dog in a crate without a shock collar to bring it to heel," he taunts.

He's still laughing when the bullet goes into his skull.

James' eyes are wild and his face pinched with pain, but his hand on the gun is steady.

Rumlow's body falls backwards over the rail, remote control smashing onto the cement below, a moment before the body joins it with a wet thud.

Rollins, scrambling to his feet behind him, turns and runs back towards the balcony door, towards the exit.

James lands on the catwalk near Steve's slumped form a moment later, and looks up at his team. “<We'll have to take the front way out. We can't pull Steve up through the roof.>”

Piotr groans and hops down, handing James the rest of his usual arsenal. James nods his thanks, buckles his holsters on, then slings his free arm under Steve. Steve groans, and his eyelashes flutter open. “You need to walk,” James says, tearing the left sleeve off his jumpsuit and using it to bind Steve's wound. “We're going out the long way.”

“I can do it,” Steve says, pale and pained from blood loss, but gamely getting his feet under him. He transfers his shield to his right arm and leans against James. They limp towards the door, Steve gradually speeding up and becoming more stable on his feet the further they get along the catwalk.

Rollins is ahead of them, glancing back at the murderous-looking Russian with the torn sleeve and the robot arm tattoo, at the bleeding national icon under his arm, and decides that all of this is above his pay grade. He punches the door code as the blonde chaperone clutches her shoulder and yells, “what the hell are you doing?”

As the door slides open, Rollins grabs her and says, “Helping you to safety.” He drags her through

the door and goes to touch the keypad to shut it, but two bullets from James' gun cause the keypad to explode into sparks. A third bullet slams into his knuckles. "Aw, you got me in the fuckin' hand," Rollins whines, glances behind him again, then runs for it.

"Asshole," says the blonde, to Rollins' fast-retreating back. Blood trickles between her fingers as she clutches at her shoulder wound. She grabs her walkie-talkie and barks into it, "North corridor N62, hostiles escaping with the prisoner, send all available teams," then, duty done, she runs for it too.

As they get through the door, Steve catches James' look of confusion at the branching corridors in front of him. He pushes out of James' arms and strides forwards, gritting his teeth against the pain. "This way," he hisses, yanking them down a small service corridor to their left and shutting the door. An alarm cuts on, the noise adding to the team's confusion and stress, but it's enough to mute the sound of their footsteps.

The corridor leads upwards, then to a viewing area over the SHIELD rifle range, empty at this hour. The five of them run into a secretary and a mail clerk, who both step backwards into the rooms they exited and shut the door, and a young agent who briefly considers being a hero until James and Nikolai both raise their guns and Steve grits out, "Don't do it, son."

But then they reach the main entrance hallway, and everything falls apart.

The SHIELD teams that had gone to the prison bays via the sensible, direct route and found nothing, doubled back to suddenly explode out of a different side corridor and find themselves *behind* James and Steve. A light-skinned black guy, built like an ex-quarterback and with the air of a leader, is the first one to realise, and fires a couple shots that zing just past Nikolai's ear. "There they are!" the SHIELD agent shouts. Dmitri snarls and pulls a grenade out of his baggy, ill-fitting army surplus jacket, but Steve puts out a hand, stopping him.

Because in front of them is Clint Barton, hobbling down the corridor towards them, a crutch under one arm, a full coffee pot in the other.

He's wearing an old purple terry bathrobe over a Cap'n Crunch t-shirt and cargo shorts, and his hair is sticking up in every direction. "Oh, hey, Cap! And Cap's boyfriend. Thought I'd get in some range time," he says as they run past, as if this is the most natural thing in the world.

Then he does a double-take. "Hey! I shot at you once," he says at James' retreating back, gesturing wildly with the coffee pot. "Somewhere sandy." He accidentally clocks a SHIELD agent, the leader, in the face with it.

"Oh, dude, so sorry," Clint says, trying to brush the coffee off the snarling Strike Team leader, and managing only to spill more coffee on the rest of the strike team, as well as tripping at least two with the crutch that slips out from under his arm. "Whoa, man, watch it," he says. "Injured Avenger here! Mind the leg, sorry, c'mon, guys," he grumps, rebounding off a few more annoyed SHIELD agents.

The Strike Team finally make it past Clint, who is frowning at his now-empty pot. "Aw, coffee, no," he pouts.

A few minutes later, Clint waves at Arthur, the rifle range supervisor. "Hey dude, gonna get in some target time, we cool?"

“Always, Mr Barton, sir!” Art throws him a quick salute. “Since you don't have your bow with you... do you need anything from the armory?”

Clint looks down at his bathrobe pockets, bulging with the guns he lifted off the passing strike team. “Nah, I'm good, thanks.”

\* \* \*

They're clear. They're *almost* clear. After a few suppressing shots from Nikolai and James, the strike teams behind them miraculously melted away without returning fire. Those teams will be back, of course, but maybe they won't be back fast enough to make a difference. It's become a game of seconds. A five-second lead at the right time will make the difference between escape and failure. Between open air and prison cells. Just down the big steps and across the atrium with its big inlaid SHIELD logo on the floor and they're home free.

Steve can do this. His side hurts like hell and he already is getting the sickening plasticky feeling of his body re-knitting himself but they are *almost* there. He can see the light through the glass doors, the sunshine that's come out since they were in the prison bays.

And then Fury steps up the top of the steps. With thirty armed agents.

“Didn't think you had it in you, Steve,” says Fury.

"Maybe you never looked," responds Steve.

“Okay, weapons down, reach for the sky,” says one of the SHIELD agents next to Fury, gesturing with his assault rifle.

Steve and James look at each other. Near them, Piotr nods imperceptibly.

“Hands up?” asks Dmitri.

“Yeah, hands up,” says Fury.

“Okaaaay!” says Dmitri, pulling his big ham-hands out of his jacket and opening them.

Three smoke grenades roll out of each hand, clattering onto the floor and filling the area with dense, white-grey smoke.

“Fuck--” yells the SHIELD second-in-command, as Steve's crew dart to their right, into a conference room with big, floor-to-ceiling windows over gorgeous, industrial Jersey City. Nikolai, bringing up the rear, kicks the door shut on the billowing smoke of the corridor, as pandemonium breaks out behind them.

Steve unslings his shield and hands it to James. “Break the window,” Steve says. Steve means *throw the shield at the window* but James takes it as *use the shield like a battering ram*, but hey, that works too. Broken safety glass cascades down in pellets, down six stories to cracked pavement below.

“You better be sure,” James growls, standing on the edge of the window, at Piotr.

“I'm always sure. When have I ever messed up transport?” Piotr snarks back.

“Aleppo,” James glares.

“That was *your* fault,” says Piotr.

James shrugs and steps backwards into space, still holding the shield.

Steve rushes over as fast as he can, the wound pulling at his side--

--in time to see James execute a neat backflip and land in a crouch on the wing of a hovering quinjet, piloted by Arseny.

“Show-off,” yells Piotr, as he jumps too. James just holds up his fist with his thumb stuck between his index and middle fingers, and then smoothly opens that fist to steady Piotr as he lands. Ivan has opened the quinjet door and ushers them inside.

Dmitri and Nikolai jump next, and once they are inside, Steve looks over his shoulder. The conference room door explodes open and Nick Fury strides through. Steve smiles his war-bond smile, salutes, and steps off the windowsill into thin air.

His backflip isn't quite as neat and his landing is a hot mess, but as he's hauled inside by James and Dmitri he can't help grinning at the concentrated anger on Nick Fury's face.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Tony Stark trails behind a pizza deliveryman who is carrying a whopping ten pies, none of which seem to be for him, up to the Avengers lounge floor. He looks down at the kale, spinach, apple and ginger smoothie in his hand, then at the pile of pizzas, and decides that dammit, it's his tower and he's claiming droit du seigneur on the pepperoni.

He walks in to the lounge, does a quick sweep of the room with his eyes, then cocks his head at Steve, laid out on an ivory leather sofa, his shirt off, his midsection heavily bandaged. “One,” Tony says, “no bleeding on the sofas, Steve. Two, why are you sitting in my tower having pizza with Interpol's Most Wanted, Russia Division?”

Steve grins. “Because they helped me with that whole breaking into SHIELD to rescue a secret Russian supersoldier that I didn't tell you about so you could deny it if asked,” he says, pointing to James, who waves, his mouth full of pepperoni pizza. *Tony's* pepperoni pizza.

“Oh, so that's not going to come back to bite me in the ass at all,” Tony says, walking over towards James.

“In fact, Sir,” comes Jarvis' voice, “Colonel Fury and a detachment of SHIELD operatives are downstairs now, currently trying to override my protocols.”

Tony snatches the box of pepperoni (still half full, thank God) away from James, who scowls at him. “Easy with the murder eyes,” Tony frowns. “My tower; my pizza.” Then he looks up at Jarvis. “Jarve, play with them for about ten minutes then let them think they've won, and send 'em up.”

“Yes sir,” says the AI.

“Seriously, you okay?” Tony asks, pointing with his smoothie glass at Steve's wound.

“Yeah,” Steve says. “You should see the other guy.” Then he blinks. “Actually, what happened to the other guy?”

“Dead,” James says, around his slice of pizza.

Steve sighs. “So much for non-lethal.”

James puts his pizza down and glares. “He shot you. In the gut,” he enunciates clearly and quietly, and almost devoid of emotion.

“Next time, don't--” Steve begins.

James shrugs and reaches for the pizza again. “Next time, don't get shot.”

They look up to the sound of boots coming down the hallway.

Fury strides in at the head of about fifteen SHIELD agents, all fully armed.

“Oh hi, welcome, *mi casa es su casa*, *apparently*,” says Tony, leaning back in an armchair and crossing his legs. “Seriously, Nick, anytime, and by anytime I mean never.”

Fury just snorts in Tony's general direction then folds his arms and glares at Steve. “Cute stunt, Rogers. You really thought you could run? Now we have to take you *both* in. And turn your friends--” he nods at James' team, “--over to Interpol.”

Once again, Steve wonders how much of this Fury had foreseen, if the SHIELD director had realised that Steve was losing his heart for the fight (the fight that never seemed to end, the fight against... who?), and that SHIELD had to lock Steve in by other ways. By any way possible.

The SHIELD agents file in and surround them.

And then, from behind, comes an elegant voice. “Pardon me.”

“Ma'am,” says a SHIELD agent in the doorway, and Steve can hear the scuff of his feet as he steps aside, then the click-click of high heels tipping past.

“Ah, there you are, Steve,” comes Pepper's voice. She is, as usual, in an immaculate little suit, this one dove-grey and paired with pale peach suede high heels. She raises an eyebrow at the SHIELD troops, steps into the room, and pushes an assault rifle muzzle out of her way with one manicured finger. A stack of folders are tucked under her other arm. “Is your phone dead? I've been trying to call you,” she admonishes.

Steve holds up his cellphone, in which Rumlow's second bullet was embedded.

“Ooh,” Pepper says, “Do me a favour and give that to Daneisha in Marketing. That might be quite a good sales angle.” She fans her hand out. “StarkPhone, with the screen it takes a bullet to break.” Then she frowns. “Daneisha will think of something more clever, she's so much better at copywriting than me.”

“Miss *Potts*,” interjects Fury, cutting her off, his voice bone-dry.

“Ah, yes, my apologies, Director Fury. This will only take a minute,” she says, walking over to Steve.

“I have the papers you requested.” She smiles, and it's quite a self-satisfied little smile, but then it has every right to be. “Here are the originals,” she says, handing a folder to Steve. Then she turns to Fury. “And here is your copy, Director.”

“What the hell is this?” Fury says.

Steve looks up at him, mild and innocent. “Oh, yeah. Under the laws of international salvage, I'm claiming ownership of decommissioned Russian weapon prototype AMRL2EX01007.”

A furrow appears between Fury's brows that is the approximate depth of the Grand Canyon.

Steve holds up a piece of paper with an ornate seal on it, and several signatures. “The Russian government has agreed to this, with the proviso that AMRL2EX01007, or Seven as he is known for short, is – barring world-threatening disaster - never returned to military duty. And, to maintain the balance of power, the Russians have asked that I step down from active service, too. You'll find my resignation letter in the file.”

The only sound in the room is whispered Russian; Piotr translating for the rest of James' squad.

Fury flips through the file, growing visibly paler by the page.

“Oh, there's something else,” Pepper says. “I took the liberty of contacting the descendents of the Barnes family. Turns out the original Bucky Barnes has a younger sister who is still alive, as well as all sorts of nephews and nieces. Now, explaining to them what had happened isn't the *strangest* thing I've ever had to do, but I *am* married to Tony. *So.*” Pepper looks over at James. “Seven, it is accurate that your base DNA is that of James Buchanan Barnes, from Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn, died 1927?”

James nods. “I have seen my files. It is accurate.”

“Marvellous. They were *very* interested to find out that Bucky Barnes survived, in a way. Oh, and they agreed to apply for a waiver of Bucky's death certificate, to reflect that he is, in effect, still alive. It's the same thing we did for Steve. Gotta say, never stops being weird, but there you go. Seven, you have a family. They're very keen to meet you. They're also very... loud. I would not suggest meeting them all at once. It's... a lot.”

James just blinks, pale eyes glittering with suppressed emotion. In fact pretty much everyone just blinks.

Steve reaches over and takes James' hand, giving it a squeeze. He shoots his boyfriend a fond look.

“That's not legally binding,” Fury states. “Clones have no status under the law.”

Pepper smiles. “Then it's a good thing that the salvage documents *are* binding. But if you do decide to flout them and take Seven away, I'll be so disappointed to tell the *New York Times* journalist waiting downstairs that he's not going to get his in-depth interview with the newly-retired Captain America and his boyfriend. We'll just have to make do with a tearful interview with Rebecca Barnes-Proctor, who is the most adorable old granny you've ever seen, and Steve himself.”

Pepper fakes a little gasp, and puts a hand to her mouth. “Unless you're going to *arrest* Steve, and then that reporter will have the scoop of the decade. Oh, and of course I'll have to inform dear Sergei at the embassy that you have some of their property. Apparently Putin gets weird about that.



Like, bomby weird.”

“Miss Potts--” Fury begins, stepping forwards.

Pepper tilts her head slightly. Her eyes go icy. “Please try me, Director Fury. Please try to outmaneouver me in the court of public opinion. I will greatly enjoy destroying you and your entire agency. I've spent fifteen years dealing with Tony's *litany* of public relations disasters. Don't think that I can't *cause* them just as well as I fix them.”

“I resemble that remark,” mutters Tony.

“So,” Steve says, rising to his feet, still a little wobbly. “I guess all that remains is for me to return this to you.” He hands Fury his shield. “The door is that way. Don't let it hit you on the way out.”

“This is *not* over,” Fury growls, the shield bright and incongruous in his hands; against his dark trenchcoat.

“Oh, I assure you, it is,” says Pepper. She motions towards the elevators. “Now, if you don't mind? I'd hate to have to call security.”

Fury pauses for a moment, his eyes sweeping the room, calculating.

James rises to his feet, graceful and catlike and full of menace. His squad also stand, and Fury can't miss that they're all still fully armed. Nobody makes an overt aggressive action, but the intent is clear.

Tony slurps his smoothie and looks up. “Do I need to call a suit? I'm going to call a suit. I'm feeling anxious. Pepper, the bad men are making me feel anxious in my own home,” he pouts.

“Aww,” she says, rubbing his shoulder. “Perhaps I could light a fire under them.”

“Huh,” says Piotr. “For once we are not the bad men.”

Tony gestures with his pizza slice. “Nice feeling, isn't it?”

Steve continues to give his best aw-shucks smile in the general direction of the SHIELD crew.

Fury grunts, looks Steve in the eye, and nods. “Well played, Rogers,” he says, then turns on his heel. “Let's go,” he says, stalking out of the room without a backward look. The SHIELD agents holster their guns and follow.

The room echoes with their absence as everyone sits or stands in silence, processing what has happened.

Steve manages to last several minutes after SHIELD exits the building before deflating from the stress he's been shoving down for almost a week. Hell, the stress he's been ignoring since he came out of the ice. He lets out a ragged breath and collapses into the silky steel of James' arms.

And he laughs, soft and hysterical. “I quit,” he says. “I quit being Captain America.”

“I know,” says James, holding him tight and stroking his hair. “Are you sorry?”

Steve giggles again and nuzzles closer into James' neck, along the strong line of his jaw. “No.” he breathes. “I think... I think it's the best thing I've ever done.”

Tony holds up his green, gloopy smoothie in salute. “To Malibu, wherever ye may find her.”

Then he looks at James and winks. "Or him."

## Chapter End Notes

### [Chapter title song.](#)

Your reminder that we have an amazing Lucky Seven fanmix by [Rohkeutta](#), and you can find it [on Spotify here!](#)

We've also got our second piece of Stucky Big Bang art, from [artist JustGot1!](#) See it at the top.

Quick comment on the Black Cat crew and their names / nicknames:

Piotr is always Piotr, because if you try to call him by a diminutive or nickname he will kick you in the shins.

Likewise, Arseny is always Arseny. Hey, not everyone has a nickname.

Nikolai is Kolya to his friends.

Ivan -> Vanya

Dmitri -> Dima

Friends. FRIENDS. Almost 18,000 hits. A ton of comments. WOW. \*snifs\* I LOVE YOU ALL. Your comments are amazing. A girl doesn't want diamonds; she wants paragraph-long comments on AO3. FACT.

Also can I just say Tony & Pepper 4EVA and also Bumbling (but Clever) Clint! It's so nice writing people being awesome and heroic, but also themselves.

Bike! Porn! Meet the BMW R nine T Scrambler. If you image-google "bmw r nine t" you'll see [lots](#) of [custom versions](#) of [this bike](#), which is really cool because you can see what someone like James would do to something like this. (Although because James is kind of a jerk about bikes, he'd be riding a [BMW HP4](#) instead, which is a bike so big that even Ducati people are like "NOPE".)



# Better Things

## Chapter Summary

That *New York Times* interview.

*nb: this is not the final chapter. there will be one more chapter after this! see notes for details.*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### *The Barnes Ultimatum*

*Steve Rogers on love, sacrifice, and putting down the shield*

*A New York Times Magazine exclusive*

It's a fine late-summer day in Brooklyn and I'm sitting by myself at a four-person window table at a busy Carroll Gardens eatery, the sort tipped elsewhere in this paper as a 'hot new restaurant'. The hostess huffs at me, glancing pointedly at the queue of people waiting to get in, and I check my phone, then put a hand up to pacify her. This isn't the first time I've tried to interview the notoriously publicity-shy Steve Rogers. It isn't even the first time I tried to arrange *this* interview. But I've been assured by his people that he's *definitely* going to be here, and no amount of glaring from an underemployed actress in a black apron is going to stop me from waiting as long as it takes.

Full disclosure, dear reader: I am a gay man. Steve Rogers coming out, then announcing he's stepping down as Captain America to spend more time with his hot biker boyfriend? These past 48 hours have been the best of my life, and that's not even counting the *schadenfreude* of watching the right-wing news media have a collective shit-fit.

But all this is of no concern to the dime-store Demi Moore managing this restaurant. She stalks over, and as she opens her mouth to reprimand me, her words are drowned out by the throaty growl of a sizeable motorcycle pulling up to the curb. "My friends," I smile at her. And internally my stomach does a considerable flip when I see that Captain Rogers has brought the boyfriend to our interview. The hostess' face does something complicated and fishlike as Captain Rogers unwraps himself from around the driver of the bike and pulls off his helmet, revealing that golden, all-American head.

As Captain Rogers swings his leg over the bike, I get a moment to reflect that he's real, and he is that perfect, and he's going to have lunch with me. And what does a retired war hero, Avenger and national icon wear to brunch with a journalist? A plain white t-shirt that's half a size too small (it's okay, I can find it in my heart to forgive him), an old pair of Levi's, and red Converse sneakers.

Then, the boyfriend: the man the whole country is dying to know about, the one who stole Captain America's heart. Who so far has only been seen in blurry gossip-site photos and masked or

helmeted at OpenGP motorcycle races.

He is as tall as Captain Rogers, and just as ridiculously well-built. But beyond that, they are a study in contrasts. Captain Rogers is easy aw-shucks smiles and the perfect curves of a Greek statue. James Barnes is hard angles and a quiet, sensual grace. One, short blond hair and warm blushes on porcelain skin. The other, long dark hair and cold, ice-pale eyes. And, as Barnes peels off his black-and-silver racing jacket (the number 7 in scarlet across the back), the final contrast: a multitude of tattoos wind down his heavily-muscled arms, their mainly black, silver and red colors set off by the pale-blue v-neck tee he wears.

I stand and wave, and Captain Rogers strides towards me, warm and apologetic. "We're so sorry to keep you waiting. Something, uh, something came up," he says, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Barnes was following. And, inadvertently, revealing quite a hickey on his trapezius. Oh, Captain Rogers. Do I need to have a talk with you on behalf of America about the perils of dating bad boys?

But before I can figure out how to broach the subject, said bad boy is slinging his racing leathers over the back of a chair and glancing through impossibly long, dark eyelashes at his Captain, a faint blush on his high cheekbones. He's nervous, I realise, and that hypothesis is confirmed as Captain Rogers puts a hand on the small of Barnes' back and indicates me. "James, this is Mr Cohen, from the *Times*," Captain Rogers says, low and reassuring.

"Hello," says Barnes, looking shyly away.

It takes me a moment to place the accent.

The man who stole Captain America's heart is Russian.

We sit down and make small talk as we consider the menus. Barnes and Captain Rogers keep darting little amazed glances at each other, as if each of them isn't sure all of this really exists, that the other person won't suddenly evaporate into thin air.

When our waitress comes, Captain Rogers and his boyfriend order two burgers each, and I decide to lighten the mood a bit. I grin at Barnes, who hasn't smiled once since sitting down. "I'm told that Captain Rogers has to eat a lot more than the average person because he's a super-soldier. What's your excuse?"

Barnes' pale eyes widen for a moment, and I'm pretty sure that Captain Rogers' hand moves onto Barnes' thigh. Then Barnes shrugs and says in that smoky Russian lilt, "Same reason."

Captain Rogers smiles, looking down at his lap, and blushes all the way to the tips of his ears. "Sometimes you find the perfect guy... and it turns out he's *really* the perfect guy," he breathes.

My jaw just about hits the table. "Wait," I say, "You're telling me that your boyfriend... is a Russian super-soldier?"

"Yeah," Captain Rogers says, and the smile that spreads across his face just about lights up the whole restaurant. He turns the full wattage of it on Barnes, who in return stops biting his lip and smiles back, sly and naughty. When their eyes meet, it's as if I, and the rest of the world, fade into nonexistence. Their hands entangle under the table as microexpressions flit across their faces, and I begin to think of phrases last aired in Jane Austen novels, such as "utterly besotted".

I clear my throat as Captain Rogers darts in to plant a quick kiss on the side of Barnes' mouth, and they reluctantly pull apart.

I ask Barnes about his past. Everybody knows Captain Rogers' history; heck, he *is* American history. But the Russian version? I'm already madly texting the Russian intern at our office to google anything she can on it. (She comes back with nothing.) Meanwhile, I'll work with the primary source.

Barnes tucks an escaped lock of hair back behind his ear, then turns those pale eyes on me. It's *arresting*. He has the sort of physique that's packed with muscle but has almost no body fat, so with every tiny shift of his posture you end up being distracted by the play of his deltoids as he leans forwards, or the tightening of a pec. The fact that both he and Captain Rogers wear their shirts on the small side doesn't help matters at all. Barnes runs his tongue over the perfect cupid's-bow of his top lip and at this point I'm ready to believe that if his photo isn't in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary under the definition of *sinful* then it's time to start a petition. "I emigrated to New York two years ago. Before that, all is classified. I am sorry."

Behind me, out on the street, a dog is barking. Barnes looks past me, a sort of recognition flashing in his eyes. He gets up quickly, excusing himself, and goes outside. Captain Rogers watches him leave, a fond smile never leaving his face. Barnes strides up to a hipster girl walking a large black and white pit bull.

"That's his dog, and Darcy, his shop manager," Captain Rogers explains, watching his boyfriend get down on his knees and make much of the wiggling dog.

"So," I say to Captain Rogers, voicing what so many of us must be feeling. "You had to go all the way to Russia to find the boy next door."

Captain Rogers grins in my vague direction, his eyes never leaving Barnes. "Nah, he's from my neighborhood." Of course, I think, it's long been rumoured that Captain Rogers had settled in Red Hook, and Barnes' bike shop was off King Street.

"He's very down to earth for someone that good-looking," I say, testing the waters.

"Oh, he has absolutely no idea how hot he is," Captain Rogers sighs. "It's a problem."

Which is a perfect opening for the more serious part of the interview. I ask the good (and besotted) Captain if it's true that he gave up the shield due to Barnes. He fidgets, and his face takes on a note of sadness.

"It's something I've been thinking about for a while, and certain recent events in my life – certain things I found out about my past – made me come to my decision. James has helped. Before him, the Avengers were my only friends. I, I mean, I adore the Avengers, and I'm still going to see a lot of them. We're, we're going to dinner at the Tower tomorrow night. But it's hard for me to, to find people I connect with. I've known I wanted to start a new phase in my life for a few years but I didn't know what that phase would be. I also didn't want to do it alone, but there wasn't anyone to do it with. Not for lack of trying. I have been on... so many blind dates. Then James."

Captain Rogers looks down at his lap, his voice suffused with love and admiration. "James inspired me. He was literally created to be a weapon. Instead he uses his hands to build things. It got me to thinking. What else could *my* hands do?"

Barnes reappears and whispers something in Captain Rogers' ear before sitting down, his hand resting gently and possessively on his boyfriend's neck. "I'm telling him about the Sarah plan,"

Captain Rogers whispers back.

Then, to me, Captain Rogers continues: "My mother was a nurse. I have a good foundation of medical knowledge from her, and from my time in the War. Beyond that, I've decided to get my EMT qualification and do relief work, wherever I can be of use. I want to help clean up after fights. I'm tired of only doing the damage."

"I'm going with him," Barnes says to me, inclining his head towards Captain Rogers.

Captain Rogers immediately turns to his boyfriend, a sort of righteous indignation in his eyes. "James, you can't. What about--"

--it will wait," Barnes straight-up growls at Captain Rogers. "If you are going to dangerous places then I am coming too, to protect you while you work. And to help."

They talk at once. Captain Rogers angrily starts "I don't need—" / "--Lower. Manhattan," Barnes counters, folding his arms and giving his boyfriend a *fight me* look.

Captain Rogers leans back in his chair, eyes narrow. "I can take care of myself--" / "--you don't have to," says Barnes, running fingers down Captain Rogers' arm. "You don't *have* to."

Captain Rogers sits forwards in his chair again, the cheap restaurant furniture squeaking in protest, and grabs Barnes' hand, pressing it to his lips. "But what about your bike thing? I don't want you to sacrifice your dream for mine."

Barnes smiles fondly and shakes his head, as if unable to believe his luck at finding someone as wonderful as Captain Rogers. "It will take a while to organise. And I want to do races not just in America and other rich countries. The people I want to have racing, it's important that they know they're welcome. That the race comes to them."

"Tell him," Captain Rogers says, tugging at Barnes' hand to force him to look over in my direction.

"Well," Barnes begins, and there's that little head tilt again, the one that makes his hair drift loose and causes everyone within a ten-foot radius to suppress the urge to tuck it back behind his ear. "I used to race OpenGP. I was technically legal, because I pass for human. I'm very good at passing. Lots of practice. And I look human. My--" and his brows draw together, as if trying to puzzle out a word. He's about to reach for his phone when Captain Rogers steps in.

--enhanced metabolism?" he suggests.

--yes, enhanced metabolism, sorry, I only know it in Russian. Anyway, it isn't one of the things they screen for when they blood test. Most sports, they do these tests, to keep the sport human-only. Now I will probably be banned from OpenGP but it is no big deal. Tony Stark and I are going to start a new race circuit for everyone else, all the mutants and inhumans and... *different* people. So we have a place. Open race; three engine size classes, handicapping system to make it more fair... anyone can show up with any bike and is welcome to race."

Barnes breathes in a ragged breath, and his tone softens, so low I can barely hear it. "I know what it's like to hide. This will be one day where people like me don't have to hide. We all race in masks and helmets anyway, so they can be safe, no identities revealed... but they can also be fully themselves." I notice Barnes is unconsciously rubbing his thumb along part of the elaborate sleeve tattoo on his left arm, the one that makes it look like a mechanical device. Specifically, he's touching what looks like a stylised serial number or coachbuilder's mark. "I don't know if this will make sense to you. But I think it will make sense to other people like me."



“It's really just, just a boondoggle so he and Tony can build irresponsibly overpowered motorcycles,” Captain Rogers demurs, his face a mix of pride, exasperation and concern.

“That too,” Barnes smiles. “We have some speed records to break. 376 has stood for too long.”

Captain Rogers' eyes widen slightly and he rounds on Barnes. “Wait. If you're coming with me for relief work, I want to be in the pits every time you race. Never again will I watch you crash on TV from half a continent away. I can't survive going through that again. I have to be right there.”

James nods. “Fair,” he says. “If I crash again, I want to wake up with you next to me anyway. No more sleeping in the bed of the pickup truck in a cornfield until I heal.”

Captain Rogers' face goes through a complicated mix of expressions at that point, most of which seem to vary between *what* and *no* and *oh my god*.

“See,” Barnes says, low and taunting, a sly smirk on his face, “I can take care of myself too.”

Captain Rogers points at Barnes, his voice commanding. “You and I will talk about this later.” Then he turns his perfect face towards me, his eyes glittering with emotion. “He crashed in Indianapolis, during the OpenGP race there. This was before I knew he was, he was, like me... I thought he *died*. Never again.” (When I get home, I look up a Youtube video of the crash. It's terrifying, and I gain an immediate respect for anyone who would willingly participate in a sport that was so dangerous, while at the same time doubting their sanity.)

Speaking of *never again*, I ask Captain Rogers if he would be okay with someone else becoming Captain America. He looks surprised, momentarily, then delight spreads across his face.

“Actually... that would be... I'd love that,” he says. “I'd feel less like I'd let everyone down if someone else takes up the shield. It's an important symbol, even if the person behind it doesn't stand for what certain noisy news outlets want him to.” Captain Rogers' eyes positively sparkle with mischief.

I ask if he has anyone in mind that he thinks would be appropriate as the new Captain America. Rogers doesn't miss a beat: “Sam Wilson,” he says. “Former soldier, VA counsellor, could be an amazing voice to get America's criminally under-funded veterans' programmes strengthened. And for him to represent America... It could give a lot of kids hope about their future.

“So for you, the perfect way to follow up a gay Captain America is with a black Captain America?” I ask, watching all my ninth-grade history lessons about Steve Rogers' pugilistic Brooklyn-socialist upbringing dance in front of my eyes.

“Absolutely,” says Captain Rogers. “But I'm not gay. I'm bisexual.”

“But--” I begin, indicating Barnes, who radiates so much testosterone that I think our waitress might have just grown a beard.

Captain Rogers' eyes narrow in a very determined way as he cuts me off, and it's as if the temperature in the room instantly drops ten degrees. “The gender of my current partner doesn't change what genders I am attracted to, whether I act on that attraction or not. Also, I will not have anyone erasing Peggy Carter, her *significant* role in my life, or what she meant to me.”

Our food arrives, and Captain Rogers looks up at the waitress. “Can we get the burgers to go, actually?” Then he glances to Barnes. “Do you mind if we eat at Red Star?”

Barnes shrugs, then looks up too. “To go, please.”



The waitress nods and leaves me my kale salad niçoise, carrying the two soldiers' food to be wrapped up.

I ask if Captain Rogers has told Agent Carter about Barnes. “Not yet,” Captain Rogers says. “The past few months have been non-stop but, but now that things have hopefully slowed down, I want him to meet Peggy.” He smiles, ruefully. “I’m just a little worried they might team up on me.”

What is he going to miss most about no longer being Captain America? “Working with the Avengers. They, they are my family, in a lot of ways. It’s going to be hard, the first few times, watching them go out without me. Tony’s going to head the team from now on and, and I think he’s going to do a great job. He’s a very good leader. He just has to believe in himself, and focus.”

And what will he miss least? Captain Rogers raises his eyebrows and rubs the back of his neck with one hand as he thinks. I have the feeling he’s not so much having trouble thinking of *one* thing he won’t miss, rather which one of *many* things he is willing to talk about.

“Being an object,” he says. “Something to be collected, to be shown off, to be used without permission to represent others’ hateful opinions. It’s partly why I’m in New York. It’s great here. Nobody cares who you are.”

Nobody except the five or six people in the restaurant snapping photos of Barnes and Rogers on their phones on the down-low, that is. Maybe for Captain Rogers that *does* count as “nobody cares”.

“I wasn’t always like this, you know,” Captain Rogers continues, indicating his Adonis-like body. “I was small, the kind of person you’d look right through, until I was 21.” He shakes his head. “People, people follow me. And touch me. Like, like I’m just there for their entertainment. Like I’m not a real person.”

I point out that the skin-tight uniform probably doesn’t help, and immediately get That Look again. The *there’s a disease going round called These Hands and if you open your mouth again you’re gonna catch it* look.

“It shouldn’t matter what I’m wearing. Just like women should be able to wear what they want without being hassled. Miniskirt or niqab. It’s not about clothes. You can’t say oh, it’s okay, the *clothing* made me do it, that’s not--”

“But you’re keeping the uniform, yes?” Barnes asks, gazing at Rogers, his face a picture of innocence as he cuts off his boyfriend’s inbound rant.

Captain Rogers’ eyebrows furrow. “I--” he starts, confused.

Barnes bats his frankly illegal eyelashes at him, somehow managing to look angelic and filthy at the same time.

Then Captain Rogers’ huge shoulders start to shake, and laughter bubbles out of the man, more and more, until he’s forced to put his forehead down on Barnes’ shoulder to hide his blush, one hand on the brunet’s back, and the other hand under the table going somewhere that isn’t entirely PG given the way Barnes’ pupils dilate.

“He’s keeping the uniform,” Barnes says to me with a wink, before gently but firmly returning his boyfriend to a sitting-up position.

“It’s not fair,” says Captain Rogers, in something almost close to a pout. “You, you don’t have a uniform.”

Barnes cocks an eyebrow and tilts his head in an expression of disdainful disbelief. He looks at me. “Moment, please,” he says, then he leans in close to his boyfriend. “Let me remind you what I race in,” he says quietly, and the rest is lost to a whisper too low for me to hear. But judging by the rising colour in Captain Rogers' cheeks and the way his eyes blow black, the memories are... pleasant indeed. I pull up a picture on my phone of Barnes at a race and okay, yeah, that's a guy who can wear the hell out of racing leathers.

The waitress brings two large take-out bags and the bill, and as I reach for the magazine's corporate card, Captain Rogers waves me off. “It's the least I can do, for rescheduling on you,” he says, dropping cash down for the bill and a sizable tip.

The waitress thanks him, and then fidgets, biting her lip and looking at him nervously through mascara-clumped lashes.

“It's okay,” Captain Rogers says, motioning for the waitress to get out her phone.

And so the man tired of being an object submits gracefully to one last selfie, one final pinprick from a celebrity collector, before his boyfriend tosses him the keys to the bike and they ride off into the afternoon of their own personal endless summer.

## Chapter End Notes

### [Chapter Title Song.](#)

Later edit: starlessfuture has made an awesome playlist for this fic, complete with song commentaries! [Check it out here.](#) I really love seeing everyone's musical and art interpretations and yay, new music for me to listen to!

Hey friends! I had about a 12,000-word final chapter planned and then I found out I had to go away on a family thing with no internet for 10 days. So rather than just vanish on you, I'm splitting the Leviathan in two. Thus! We have ballooned to 13 chapters from 12.

The talking at once thing in this chapter is an old Caryl Churchill device that I think she used in *Top Girls*. (Great play.)

Still to come: smut, Avengers, brothers, Darcy finally meeting Sam, the healing power of Zootopia, more smut, James meeting his relatives, racing, probably even more smut.

(In case you're wondering, this chapter is somewhat based off Margot Robbie's recent interview in *Vanity Fair*, where she is, no lie, basically interviewed by Troy McClure. [It's... quite something.](#) Like, I'd be worried to actually have a paper copy of the magazine, in case the pages were stuck together when I got them.)

Also still to be posted by me: our amazing final piece of art, by [Dadbob / Electran.](#) Their work is so nice I want to have it as the final goodbye kiss from the series, at the top of Chapter 13...

So: Stay cool! I'm going to be boring with my family with no internet and lots of books for ten days! As soon as I come home, FINAL CHAPTER! Expect it first week of August. If you're totally going into cute gay boys withdrawl, [here, let me introduce you to the garden of delights that is Check Please](#).

Meanwhile, it's time for....

BIKE PORN: HISTORY EDITION! Hells yeah. Get in here, history nerds. My people! Look, it's the Harley-Davidson XA, the bike Steve Rogers probably would have driven in World War II. It even comes with a convenient holster for your Tommy gun! \*swoons\* Here's [a pretty good layman's summary of the XA in the War](#), with lots of period photos of Captain America-looking dudes riding bikes with white stars on them. Mind, if Steve did something stupid with his bike like, I dunno, threw it at a German tank\*, Phillips probably busted him back to [the standard Harley WLA](#).

*\*In Captain America: White #1, in the opening scene either Bucky or Steve mentions hearing an enemy "Sherman tank" approach and my inner military history nerd had such a conniption I was unable to finish the series. (Also the art was pants.)*

# Starlings

## Chapter Summary

□

Art by [Dadbob / Electran](#)

You are the only thing in any room you're ever in.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Darcy's tiny fifth-floor studio apartment looks as if a clothes bomb has gone off inside it. Every surface is covered in elements of her extensive and colourful wardrobe. That includes James, after the pink petticoat he nixed as “too much” lands on him. And Pingu, happily curled up on top of a pile of white clothing that she can liberally cover in short black dog hairs.

Darcy blushes. “Oops! Was aiming for the laundry basket.” Then she narrows her eyes at how James is sitting – not sitting, in fact, but squatting near a wall, arms resting on his knees, with a good view of the door and the studio's two windows. “You'll never convince me that's comfortable,” she hisses.

James shrugs, pulls the petticoat off his head, and tosses it back at her. “Darcy. What were you going to wear to work tomorrow?”

“Um...” she putters around the apartment, in a sleep shirt and boxers, picking things up as she searches under piles. “My Hipster Apocalypse jeans? And my new gingham top? And red suede heels?”

James spreads his hands. “There. Wear that tonight.”

“But... dinner with Avengers!” Darcy squeaks, doing nervous little jazz hands.

James just tilts his head slightly and looks straight at her with his ice-blue eyes.

Darcy sighs. “You're going to do that thing where you just stare at me until I agree with you, aren't you?” she says.

James raises one eyebrow ever so slightly.

“Ugh, *fine*,” Darcy groans, throwing up her hands and turning away from him. “But I'm blaming you if it ends up in some horrible fashion disaster.” Then she looks down at the piles everywhere. “Now I just have to *find* that outfit...”

The Hipster Apocalypse jeans ([a pair of drop-crotch, black skinnies](#) with artfully-placed tears) hit her in the back of the head a moment later.

“Do *not* throw the shoes,” Darcy says, whirling around.

James stands up and extends the red shoes to Darcy with a graceful bow. "I'm going to Steve's. You will be ready in an hour, milady?"

"Fuck, no." Darcy says, snatching the shoes out of his hand.

"What now?" James asks.

"It's just... the natural look takes at least 45 minutes to achieve," she pouts, pointing vaguely towards the makeup scattered over a low bedside table. "A girl's contour game has to be on point if she's meeting superheroes."

"One hour," he says, grabbing his duffel bag and heading towards the door, Pingu clicking along behind him. "Of course, if you are ready early, you can come to Steve's too. We'll leave it unlocked, but please knock anyway." James shoots her a naughty smirk. "We might be busy."

James is almost sorry he can't watch Darcy's face as she mentally balances her priorities between perfect makeup and potentially catching James and Steve in a compromising position.

Before he gets to the stairs, though, he hears her whisper in awed wonder, "I could literally break the internet. One Vine to rule them all," and then the clatter of makeup cases being hurriedly picked up.

August was giving way to September, but it was still rosy and bright at 6pm as James and Pingu sauntered the ten blocks or so to Steve's. He picks them up two iced teas at a coffeeshop on the way, and lets himself into Steve's building.

Steve's apartment door is wide open and Steve has his back to the door. He's shirtless, bent over a box, zipping it up with a tape gun. He's singing along slightly off-key to *The Seldom-Seen Kid* and conducting an invisible orchestra with the tape gun as he slides the box aside and starts building up another cardboard moving box.

It's the most wonderful thing James has ever seen. He quietly hand-signals for Pingu to sit, and leans against the doorway, watching Steve, watching the light sheen of sweat gleam over his shoulders and back, watching how the old desert camo he's wearing slip off his hipbone as he dances in place to "The Bones of You".

Steve fumbles in his pocket for a sharpie, and writes "BOOKS" in big sloppy letters across the box.

And James can't resist.

He walks in, silently, and places the two cold iced teas against Steve's flanks as he bends over the box.

The man formerly known as Captain America does not in any way do a thing that can later be referred to as "squealing like a girl" or "jumping several feet into the air".

He does give his boyfriend a stern look, remove the teas from his hands, take a big drink of one, put both cups down safely, and then shove said boyfriend against the wall. "You're a menace," Steve growls, slotting a leg between James' thighs, and running his hands down to frame James' ribcage.

James licks his top lip and tips his head back as he sticks his fingers through the belt loops of Steve's camo and pulls him closer, grinding down onto his leg. "I'm *your* menace. And you love it."

And then James smiles that big, brilliant, sly grin that he saves just for Steve, and Steve's heart judders sideways in his chest, and he has to remind himself to breathe after a moment. "Yeah," he says, his voice going husky. "Yeah, I do," and Steve leans in, tracing his lips over James', smiling back.

Steve runs his fingertips up James' chest, along his neck, and back into his long, dark hair. He fists a thick handful of James' silky hair, and yanks. James moans, and his jaw slackens, his lids drop down over his eyes. Steve uses the opening to pull James into a hard kiss, claiming him, *owning* him.

It's not enough. Steve can feel the heat rising in him, the bonfire that James sparks off by his mere physical proximity, and it's never enough, he *needs* James, in depths and vastnesses that terrify him if he thinks about them too long. But right now? He doesn't want to think. He reaches down and grabs James' ass, lifting him up slightly so James is pressed against the wall, off the ground, his hard thighs wrapping around Steve's waist. The inhuman strength of him – the iron grip of his legs around Steve, the tension through his abs and back as he holds himself up – it turns Steve on so hard. He runs his hands down the back of James' skinny jeans to grab his bare ass, and pushes his erection against James with all the considerable force he can muster.

"Fuck," moans James.

"Yeah," says Steve. "How much time do we have?"

"Not enough. We still need to shower." James blinks, and then smirks. It's a face of pure mischief.

"What," says Steve, his tone wary. He knows that look.

"You'll see," James says, with sly promise, unwrapping himself from around Steve and pushing him away.

Steve is just about to complain, because dammit, you don't just leave a man hanging like that, when he hears Sharon's voice through the open door. "Who are you, cutie?" she asks, and there is the sound of a tail thumping happily against the ground.

James rolls his eyes and leans out the doorway. "Sorry. My dog," he says. "Pingu, inside."

Pingu ignores James, continuing to weave her chunky self in figure-eights around Sharon's legs as Sharon juggles multiple grocery bags and tries to dig her keys out of her handbag.

"Here," James says, reaching towards Sharon to take some of the grocery bags.

Sharon shifts into a more defensive stance, momentarily forgetting that there is 60lbs of overly affectionate (and not easily moved) dog standing behind her feet. She mutters a surprised curse as she overbalances, and James darts forwards, throwing an arm around her back to keep her upright.

"Thanks," Sharon mumbles, as James steps away from her, divesting her of most of the grocery bags at the same time. She frowns when she sees James carrying all the bags in one hand. "Are you sure--?"

"Sharon, he can bench-press a Harley," Steve says, from the doorway. "He'll be fine with your groceries."

"Pingu, go inside," James says. Pingu continues to ignore him. Then he looks up at Steve, who is in the doorway, looking like he's going to dissolve into giggles at any moment. "You could help," he says.

"Is this the big day?" Sharon asks Steve.

"Nah. We're driving everything over to James' tomorrow." Steve smiles, reaching out to grab Pingu by the collar and lead her into the apartment. "You moving out soon, too? I mean..." He glances behind him, waving a hand at the cardboard moving boxes in his living room. "No more Captain America to babysit."

Sharon smiles back as she finds her keys unlocks her apartment. "Yeah. Finishing up the month's lease then I'm being reassigned to DC. I'll have to get used to wearing a suit again."

James follows Sharon into her apartment and deposits the groceries on the kitchen counter, then turns to leave. He glances back at her. "Um, I'm sorry about..." he mutters, making a vague gesture with his arm.

Sharon snorts. "Don't worry. Nothing hurt except my pride." She steps forwards and extends a hand. "Maybe we could start over? Hi, I'm Sharon. Thanks for helping with the groceries. I hate making two trips."

James shakes her hand. "Hello. James."

"Hello, James, nice to meet you." Sharon's lips quirk with amusement. "I have something for you. Wait there." She strides into the apartment's small spare room and comes out a moment later, something black and heavy in her hands. "Catch," she says, tossing it to James.

James grabs the thing out of the air, then looks down at it. His face flushes when he realises what it is, and his eyes glitter with the sharpness of the emotion that wells up in his chest.

It's his old black street-racing jacket.

The jacket he'd been wearing when SHIELD seized him, before he'd been stripped and shoved into an orange jumpsuit and a plexiglass box like the world's most dangerous goldfish.

He runs his fingers over the snarling cat painted on the back; the white crosses down the arms; the holes that the bullets of his would-be killers made in the leather, some old and patched, some new and ragged. And he looks up at the blonde SHIELD agent in wonder and confusion.

Sharon shrugs. "It looked important."

James hugs the jacket to himself, hiding the bottom half of his face in it, its old familiar smells of metal and exhaust and gunsmoke and blood. "You have no idea," he whispers. "T-thank you."

Sharon turns her back to him, and pulls a bottle of pinot grigio and a small box of arugula out of her grocery bags. "No problem. Just... take care of him, okay?"

"I will," James nods. "I promise. Thank you again."

"Okay. Bye," Sharon says, her back still resolutely to him as she unpacks orange juice and hummus and a little styrofoam tray of chicken breasts. "You have to leave now. Seeing strong boys cry is my kryptonite; get out of here before my face turns red and the ugly sobbing commences."

"M' not crying," James says, wiping at his eyes.

Sharon holds up an onion.

"Yeah," James says, and walks back to Steve's, still hugging the jacket.



Steve takes one look at James' face and quietly puts his arms around him. "She's pretty cool, isn't she?" Steve says. "For a babysitter."

James nods, and wriggles a bit to get out of Steve's grasp.

He lays the jacket out, lovingly, over the back of a kitchen chair. "I'm wearing this tonight," James says with a quiet smile. "We'll walk down Fifth Avenue, see who crosses the street when they spot me in it."

Steve smiles and shoves James' shoulder.

James shoves back.

"Where were we?" Steve grins, skipping out of James' reach as James grabs for him.

"You were going to take your clothes off and sit on the edge of the bath," James says, walking over and locking the front door.

"I was?"

"You were."

Steve snorts but decides to indulge James and whatever plan is cooking up in that dark head of his. He strips his shorts and boxers as he walks to the bathroom, then halts in the doorway, holding the top of the doorframe and posing as he casts a glance back at James.

James is smirking at him through a curtain of hair, one brow quirked, chin tucked, as he undoes the button fly of his jeans and begins to slide them down over his hips.

Not that they were very far over his hips to begin with. Steve *might* have confessed to having a thing about James' legs in tight jeans and that *might* have resulted in Darcy taking it upon herself to go buy James several new pairs of skinnies from one of the super-hip shops she frequents. James is wearing one of the pairs, and had brought another for the dinner at Avengers Tower tonight.

Steve has to admit, looking at how the thin, faded-black denim clung to James' thighs, that Darcy should be permanently in charge of buying James' clothes. Because *damn*.

James pulls his shirt over his head, tosses it in the vague direction of the sofa, and then reaches into his bag and takes out... something out. Something he proceeds to hide behind his back.

Steve forgets to pose as he stares at James, naked, wearing nothing but tattoos and a mischievous expression. James bites his lower lip and advances on Steve, and the way he stalks forwards makes Steve shiver involuntarily.

Steve steps back and plops down on the edge of the bath, as ordered, and James spreads Steve's knees and kneels on the tiled floor between his legs. Steve still has no idea what's going on but he is increasingly on board with it, and his body is starting to respond accordingly, cock thickening again.

James pulls out a straight razor from behind his back.

He looks down at Steve's pubes, then up to Steve's face, and raises an eyebrow.

"Uh," Steve says.

James reaches over and grabs a washcloth and Steve's shaving cream and brush. "Yes or no?"

James purrs.

“Um,” Steve answers, and spreads his legs a little wider. “Uh, uh, yes? Fuck yes.”

James smirks and starts brushing a thin layer of shaving cream over Steve's crotch. The feeling of the brush on his most sensitive skin sends currents of pleasure shooting through his body, magnified a thousandfold when James leans in to brush the shaving cream back along his perineum, and starts nuzzling and running his lips over Steve's now rock-hard dick at the same time. James flicks his tongue along Steve's length and Steve's entire body tenses as he moans.

Steve reaches for James' head, to push him closer onto his dick, but James evades his hand. “No grabbing the man with the razor,” James growls. “Hands on the tub, and don't move them. Also,” he says, his voice dropping and thickening, “Close your eyes. Okay?”

Steve nods.

James flips the razor over his fingers of his right hand, then places his thumb against Steve's groin, stretching the skin taut for the blade.

And then there is the first rasp of razor over flesh. The razor is cold, and the sensation is... the sensation is like nothing Steve has ever felt before, scary and arousing and ever so slightly painful, and he drops his head down and grips the rolled edge of the cast-iron bath for all it's worth.

The *rasp, rasp, rasp* of the razor over his skin is the only sound in the room over his ragged breathing. There are moments where the razor disappears, for James to wipe it off, and he wants to beg James to do something, keep a hand on him, keep touching him, anything. He moves a knee inwards, hoping to find James' shoulder, but just gets a rough “No. Apart.” for his troubles.

Steve can feel his body growing hypersensitive. “James, please, touch me,” he gasps out, his eyes still shut.

“Okay,” says James, and lays the flat cold side of the razor against Steve's left nipple. The sensation is so unexpected, and yet so much, Steve bites off a shout as his whole body shakes.

James removes the razor and sucks that nipple into his mouth, the burning wet heat a startling contrast to the cold of the steel. Steve twists, thrusting himself towards the heat, towards James' mouth, moaning encouragements, half-words--

--and then suddenly the flat of the razor is against his lips, like a finger, shushing him. It's removed as quickly as it is placed there, but the action is enough to cause Steve to freeze in place. Next is James' hot breath against his lips. His mouth must be fractions of an inch away. “Stay silent,” James says. “Agree?”

Steve nods again.

“Good boy,” James says, his breath ghosting down Steve's neck and over Steve's chest, but never touching. “You are magnificent,” he breathes, as he moves down Steve's abs. Then his left hand is stretching the skin under Steve's balls, making it ready for the razor, and Steve thinks that he's not ready for this, and also that he can't wait for it.

Now it's hard, sharp steel gliding over his skin, getting closer and closer to his cock and balls. His cock is so hard it *hurts*, and Steve wonders briefly if it's possible to die from pent-up desire. Every muscle in his body is taut, he can't relax, the slightest touch of razor or hand is sending lightning bolts through him and it's everything he can do to stay silent, to not let his body react the way it desperately wants to. He wants to tell James how much he hates him right now. And how much he

loves him.

James manipulates Steve's body, leaning him back on the tub so he's arched over it, moving his hands to the opposite edge, and tilting his hips so his perineum and hole are accessible. He shaves Steve there, too, down his perineum and along his crack, and each stroke of the razor builds Steve's arousal further.

Then Steve hears the faint *tik* of the razor being put down on the tiled floor.

James grunts, and without warning his hands are on Steve's ass, grabbing and spreading him, and his tongue smashes hot and hard into Steve's hole.

Steve screams, "Jesus God, James, *YES!*" as his body arches up, his cock thudding wet and stiff against his stomach as his hips judder.

But then James is gone. Steve is alone in the bathroom and he whimpers, grinding his body in the air, desperate for some sort of friction. He's ready to explode.

"Ssh," says James from the doorway. "If you talk, I stop." He steps forwards, and Steve thinks he's deliberately moving to be heard, so Steve knows where he is. Steve hears the razor being picked up again, then James orders, "sit up."

Steve does, and has to bite down on his lip to keep from making noise when James takes his balls in his hand.

"Now you must hold very still," James says quietly, his breath warm on Steve's thigh, and Steve nearly dies when he feels the first touch of the razor over his balls. It's doing his head in, this strange contrast of something feeling so good, but at the same time being something he can't chase, can't press down harder on. James shaves his balls and the base of his cock with quick, short little flicks of the razor, seemingly random and unpredictable in the order he's doing it. Steve never knows where the razor will touch next, with the result that his whole body is one mass of expectation, barely getting used to the thrill of the razor's touch before it's already moved on somewhere else.

Then everything stops again, and Steve rocks forwards, desperate and frustrated. What now?

He feels James' hand on his chin, and then James' breath on his lips. "You did good. What do you want as a reward?"

"God. Anything. Just-- *God*," Steve moans.

James hums a little noise of disappointment, then flicks his tongue out to catch a drop of sweat that is making its way down Steve's neck. "I can suggest...?"

Steve whines and nods.

"If you are just shaved for the first time," James rumbles, "you should fuck me. Because the feeling for you will be--" And James runs the fingers of both hands lightly up Steve's inner thighs and to the base of his cock. It's barely a touch but Steve can feel it so much *more* and *holy shit* and-

"*Guh*. I, I can't... not gonna be able to focus to open you up, need to do something *now*--" Steve moans.

James hums again. "Good thing I'm wearing a plug."

Steve can hear the smirk in James' voice, briefly, before the white roar of arousal blitzes everything out of his head.

“Okay, that's it,” Steve says, snapping his eyes open and grabbing his own cock to hold himself back. “Over the sofa. Now.”

James rises to his feet, as graceful as ever, and struts over to Steve's battered Chesterfield, throwing a little extra wiggle in his hips as he walks. Steve can see the plug, a dark purple, glinting between cheeks as James spreads his legs and bends himself over the quilted leather back of the sofa.

Steve gets to his feet, still dizzy from the simultaneous drought and flood of sensation that James has put him through, fumbles for the lube in the medicine cabinet, and staggers slightly less elegantly over to where James waits, on display for him. And Christ, even *walking* feels different, the shift of his thighs past his balls without any hair.

He stands behind James and runs a hand down his backbone, tracing the vertebrae, arrowing down towards the cleft in his ass and the toy that waits there. He's never tried a plug, and now looking down at one in James, he mentally marks it down as something he's going to do very soon. He rubs his palm over the toy's flared base and James hisses with pleasure, pushing back into his hand and arching like a cat. Because Steve needed to get more aroused.

“You,” Steve hisses, pushing the plug so it tips downwards towards James' prostate, “are very, very bad.”

“What are you going to do about it?” James says, his voice thick.

“Bad boys don't get toys,” Steve says, pulling out the plug and tossing it onto the sofa. And he was going to say something else, but there was James' perfect ass, all ready for him, long legs and thick thighs all spread out, and *fuck*. Steve lubes himself up messy and quick, even his own touch taking him too close to the edge.

He catches his breath then runs a hand over that ass, down to grab onto James' hip. With his other hand he lines himself up, the head of his cock pressing against James' hole, all nicely relaxed from the toy.

James moans and tries to push back against him, but Steve stops him, slipping his hand back around to push against James' ass. Which is when he gets his own mischievous idea. He steps back, and James hums a little note of displeasure and confusion.

Which turns into the most beautiful half-moan, half-cry as Steve smacks a hand across his ass.

Steve admires the red hand-print on James' right cheek and thinks it would be a shame to not have a matched pair, so hauls back and smacks him on his other cheek, too. “You like that?” Steve says, breathless.

James groans something in Russian as he grinds his leaking cock against the sofa's rolled back, and says, “more.”

“That's a shame,” Steve whispers, placing one hand over the already-fading red mark on James' left cheek. “No time,” he says, then thrusts himself balls-deep into James' tight pink hole.

James throws his head back, crying out in Russian, as a convulsion of sheer pleasure rockets through his body.

“Oh my fucking god,” Steve breathes as he holds still, hand on James' back to ground him, and lets

them both settle for a moment. His shaved skin is *so* sensitive.

“*Steve*,” James whines, pushing against him and starting to roll his hips. Even that small motion is enough to send Steve crashing into a sea of overstimulation again, barely able to hold himself together. He pulls out halfway and hammers back into James again, who braces his legs and his shoulders and isn't moved an inch despite the force Steve put into his thrust.

Steve snaps his hips and shoves into James again and again, lost in James' hot tightness and the way his newly-sensitive skin feels grinding up against James' entrance. He fucks into him harder and harder, his consciousness fracturing into nothing but the white heat uncoiling from his groin and occasional bright shards of thought, *love* and *safe* and *need* and *gorgeous*.

Sex has never been this comfortable, this good with anyone else. Steve knows this is it for him, there is nobody after James, nobody else who could make him feel like this. And as he teeters on the edge yet again, looking upwards into the supernova that is racing towards him, ready to envelop him, he realises he needs to see James' face, to kiss him. He slows himself, and runs a hand up James' side. “Baby?” he says, sliding out of James. “Turn around.”

James turns and perches on the back of the sofa, facing Steve. His face is flushed, his hair messy, and his eyes shine with love and desire. Steve frames those aristocratic cheekbones with his hands and just *looks*, he'll never be done looking at James, and James smiles up at him like he's the best thing in the whole world.

“Only you,” Steve whispers. “Only you.”

James licks his lips and Steve feels James' hands trace down his back, one staying to cup his ass, the other tracing around over his hip to wrap around his cock, to wrap around *both* their cocks, and he starts stroking up and down. James glances down and then back up into Steve's eyes just as his hand on their cocks grips harder, pumps faster. Steve convulses as the feeling explodes through him, James' rough hand, the hard silkiness of his cock. James leans forwards to kiss him. It doesn't really end up so much a kiss as moaning into each other's mouths with tongue, and James nips at Steve's lower lip before saying, “how do you want to finish? Back inside me?”

“Yes,” Steve gasps.

James twists, using raw strength to haul Steve over the back of the sofa, turning him as they land on the cushions so that Steve ends up under him. Steve adjusts his position to get comfortable and looks up, and forgets to breathe. James is kneeling over him, as if on display, his body arched slightly backwards, one tattooed arm reaching forwards to run appreciative fingers down Steve's chest. He has this determined, wrecked expression on his face, and Steve has never seen anything so beautiful.

Steve bites his lip and runs one hand up James' thigh, while grabbing hold of himself with his other hand and lining up underneath James. He looks up at James, into those pale eyes that he wants to drown in for the rest of his life, and nods.

James places a hand over Steve's, on his cock, and lowers himself down, slowly, taking Steve in, inch by inch. Steve hisses with it, riding the tidal wave of sensation that floods over him, pulling him into bright depths. He moves his hand off his cock and places it on James' other thigh, feeling the play of muscles in his legs as James takes him in. The sight of that perfect body, chest heaving, wrecked and hard for *him*, it's doing as much or more to send him hurtling towards the edge as the act of sex itself.

James' thigh muscles shift under Steve's hands as James lifts himself up and slams back down on

Steve, groaning his own need, and Steve nearly whites out from the sensation that shoots through him. James' breathing is ragged, he has one hand braced on the back of the sofa and another around his own, rock-hard, leaking cock. He starts riding Steve, hard and fast, and Steve feels like he is floating on a sparking sea of arousal, mesmerised by watching his cock go into James' body, as James crashes down onto him, chasing his own pleasure.

Steve starts snapping his hips up to meet James, and James is beyond words, eyes shut, head back, as he fists his own cock while continuing to ride down on Steve, and Steve is beyond words too, everything his eyes find is perfect, from his shaft impaling up into James to James himself.

He grunts and grabs for James' hips, thrusting up into his lover as hard as he can, no longer edging back from the bright sea flooding at him, but rushing towards it, rushing *into* it, and James shouts and grabs one of Steve's hands as he comes untouched, his cock spurting over both of their chests and his body tightening around Steve in a vise-grip.

It's more than Steve can stand, and he falls apart too, crying out in surprise at the intensity of his orgasm, shaking up into James, filling him, as his body explodes into shards of ecstatic light, sparked off like a firework from the heat of the man above him.

They both stare at each other, dazed, as they come down from their respective, simultaneous highs. Steve mumbles out in wonder as he looks up at his lover, "shit, James..."

"I know," the other man says, pushing back his sweaty hair with a hand that's still shaking slightly. He leans down, bracing himself with his hands on the arm of the sofa, and brushes his lips across Steve's. "No-one has ever made me feel like you do," he whispers into Steve's mouth. "No-one else can do to me what you can."

Steve whimpers and kisses up into James' mouth because yes, *yes*, and they have the rest of their unnaturally long lives together to explore each other, to do *this* every damn day.

"We're also keeping this sofa," James says, after a moment, his eyes bright with mischief.

Steve grins and makes a half-hearted attempt to bite James' neck--

--There's a knock on the door.

"Hello?" Steve groans.

"James is a lying liar who lies," yells Darcy through the door.

"Hello, Darcy," says James, his tone utterly unrepentant.

"You said you would leave this *unlocked*," she complains. "Also, Tony's driver is downstairs."

"Fuck!" says James, lifting himself regretfully off Steve. "We have to shower."

"Yeah well do it apart, because otherwise we'll never get to the dinner on time," Darcy groans. "Also, can I come in?"

Steve gets up and staggers into the bathroom, still dazed and floaty from great sex. He throws James a towel before turning the tap on and shutting the bathroom door for a fast, cold shower.

James opens the front door for Darcy, the towel around his waist. She glares at it, then at the state of his hair, then sniffs rather pointedly, narrowing her eyes, hands on hips.

"I regret nothing," mutters James.

"Yuh-*huh*. Where's Pingu?" Darcy asks.

"Uh," James says. "Oh no."

Steve comes out of the shower then and makes a beeline for his bedroom. And pauses in the doorway. "Pingu," he says.

Pingu glances up from the bed, tongue lolling and ears skee-whiff, from where she was lying on her back across Steve's pillows. She wriggles and thumps her tail against one of the pillows in happiness.

"Fine," Steve sighs, "make yourself comfortable where I put my *face* every night."

James decides that's his cue to grab his bag and dash into the bathroom. He comes out about ten minutes later in another pair of the skinny jeans Darcy bought, dark black this time and a fairly thin denim, and a thin grey-lavender wide-neck tee that clearly wasn't cut with someone like James in mind, from the way it clings across his shoulders.

Darcy silently holds a fist up to Steve and he bumps it. "I consider my work an important public service," she whispers.

"You sure these are okay?" James asks, indicating the jeans, which leave precisely zero to the imagination, especially when the person wearing them isn't a fan of underwear.

"Yes," Darcy and Steve chorus.

James tilts his head in an *okay, whatever you say* gesture and grabs his street-racing jacket, slinging it on. "We go?" he says.

\* \* \*

They get to Avengers Tower around seven, and Jarvis takes them up to the beautiful, multi-level common room, the one that's hardly ever used.

James' brothers are all there, as Pepper believed it was safer for them to stay at the Tower during their time in the US in case SHIELD decided to make their lives difficult. None of them actually notice James, Steve and Darcy come in, as they're too busy drinking beer and watching Tony, Dima and Piotr have a three-way argument across two languages about which country has the best heavy metal bands. Snippets of very loud songs start and then stop, as Tony and Dima jab at a tablet Piotr is holding between them.

James whistles, sharp and loud, and his unit drop everything they are doing and look over to him. "<Who let Dima near the stereo, again?>" he asks, and everyone looks a little guilty and points to someone else.

Piotr whispers a translation to Tony, who looks up, affronted. "Y'know, Russian heavy metal is actually really good," he says.

Dima grins and fistpumps next to him.

James shakes his head affectionately and distances himself from Steve and Darcy. This confuses Steve momentarily until he realises that James' brothers are all getting up and rushing over to dogpile on James, hugging him and messing up his hair and trying to knock him over at the same time. Dima is last, hurling his bulky self onto the group with absolutely no sense of consequence. James remains standing, but Piotr and Arseny start yelling and swearing at Dima for squishing them and the group breaks up into a series of small scuffles, the easy physical affection of male friendship, shoulder punches and shoves that say what voices can't, *I love you, man. I missed you.*

"Jarvis, what are they saying?" asks Tony, confused by the teasing Russian that's being thrown around between James and his brothers.

"I'm finding it difficult to translate, sir. Perhaps--"

"It's the Russian version of *Your Momma*," smiles Natasha from the doorway. "Most of those phrases have no translation. They're insulting each other's parents and sexual habits in exceptionally graphic and colourful ways." She glides in, Clint following behind, and folds herself onto a sofa. Steve notices she's blushing slightly, and Natasha sees him noticing her. "I don't get nostalgic for Russia often," she says, "but listening to strike team boys swear at each other is... making me have an emotion."

"Don't worry," says Clint, elbowing her affectionately. "We promise we won't tell anyone."

Tony yells over to the brothers, "Hey Dmitri, what was that Sokovian death metal band you mentioned?"

Dima and Piotr whisper back and forth, then Piotr calls out, "the English is something like Plague Bride, but you should look it up using the cyrillic."

"Who's talking about Plague Bride?" says Wanda, walking in. She looks gorgeous, in burgundy leather leggings and a baggy black t-shirt with a strange, pointed hem. "I love them. The best."

"Come sit next to me," says Tony, making grabby-hand motions at her. "Teach me the ways of your people and their wailing guitars." A few moments later, Wanda is explaining Plague Bride's discography to Tony, and bemoaning their recent Eurovision loss to a terrible Latverian electro-pop duo who sung about five-year plans while wearing mirrored catsuits. Meanwhile, the stereo booms with Plague Bride's heavy, thrumming music and the harshly melodic voice of its female singer.

Sam saunters in next, with a, "Hey, did I miss anything?" He glances at the stereo and frowns. "Other than a cat being tortured," then adds "anyone need a beer?". Clint's hand shoots up, as does Tony's, and Sam wanders over behind the bar to the beer fridge.

James is still in intense conversation with his brothers ("they're catching up; they've moved on to families and girlfriends and who is doing what in Russia now," Natasha explains) and so Steve glances over at Darcy. She's sitting next to him, hands shoved between her knees, shoulders hunched, uncharacteristically quiet and contained.

"You okay?" Steve whispers.

"I'm not actually that good in new situations," Darcy squeaks back. "That's Black Widow and Hawkeye and the Scarlet Witch and Falcon and I sorta forget that you're actually Captain America and there's a robot in the ceiling and, *eeep*."

"Let me see if I can break the ice," smiles Steve. He scooches a short distance away from Darcy on the sofa and says, a little louder than necessary, "So, Darcy, what's your favourite animated movie



so far this year?"

"Um," Darcy says. "Ohmigod. *Finding Dory*. So good. It's all about disability and acceptance and I totally ugly-cried and then three scenes later was laughing so hard I snorted soda out my nose." She shakes her fist. "Pixaaarrrrr," she growls in mock-annoyance.

"What," says Sam, appearing from behind the bar with a bunch of longneck beer bottles in one hand. "Not *Zootopia*?"

"Oh, uh, I haven't seen *Zootopia* yet," says Darcy, glancing over at Sam and blushing.

Sam materialises in front of her, putting down the beers on a nearby coffee table. He blinks his almond-shaped eyes at her and says, as he plops down on the sofa and takes her hand, "Hello, miss, I'm Sam Wilson and I was wondering if you've heard the good news about our lord and saviour Judy Hopps?"

Darcy snorts a laugh into her other hand. "No. I'm Darcy Lewis, and I haven't. Tell me?"

Sam digs out his phone. "Okay, wait, just watch the opening scene with me," he says, passing Darcy a beer and scooting in closer. Steve smiles to himself as before long, Sam and Darcy are shoulder to shoulder, giggling away at Mr and Mrs Hopps' career advice. "They are my parents," Darcy says. "They made a movie about *my parents*."

James finally detaches himself from his brothers and walks up behind Steve, leaning down to circle his arms around him and kiss his way up Steve's neck and along his jaw.

"I can't believe I'm about to harsh on Captain America for excessive PDA," says Clint, who is sitting across from them. "*My childhood!*" he cries in mock-despair, the back of his hand to his forehead. "You're ruining my childhood!"

"I'm fairly sure the circus ruined your childhood long before I did," Steve says. "Also I'm not Captain America any more, so--" he turns his head slightly and kisses James on the lips, deep and filthy. James growls into his mouth.

"FYI, PDA is still gross," calls Tony. "Unless I'm doing it, and then it's aspirational." Then he mutters, "wait, are Aria any good?"

"No," shouts Kolya.

"Okay, but can we talk about Aleppo now? Because I gotta know," Clint says, pointing his bottle of Rolling Rock at James. "I totally shot you. I *know* I didn't miss."

"Mm," James grunts, leaning over the back of the sofa on folded arms. "And Piotr too. He was my spotter. You were right. You didn't miss, but also you didn't hit."

Clint narrows his eyes. "Explain."

James smirks and pushes off from the sofa. "Go get your bow, archer."

Clint's grin is wide and open and delighted as he reaches down under the sofa and pulls out a bow case. He pops it open and assembles the bow with fast, sure hands. "You straight-up missed me, though."

"No, I wasn't trying to kill you. You weren't my target," James says.

Clint frowns. "You shot at me with a handgun as you were running. At that range, it was a lucky shot that you even got close to me."

James tilts his head and glares. "I shot over your left ear, because you'd move your bow into that space after you fired. Did I, or did I not, break your bow?"

"...you devious motherfucker," hisses Clint appreciatively. "You cracked it. I loved that bow."

"<Should I get popcorn?>" Natasha asks, raising an eyebrow.

"<If you wish,>" James says, wandering over to the fruit bowl on the bar and grabbing an apple.

"What's going on?" Tony says.

"Target shooting demonstration," says James.

"That sounds unsafe," grumps Tony.

"You blew up the entire 67<sup>th</sup> floor last week, Tony," counters Clint. He stands, and tests the bow. "Okay. So. James. We're both on rooftops, about 300 yards apart, and you and your spotter were abandoning position--"

"--*leaving* position, I had eliminated the target--"

"--whatever, big guy. I had standing orders to take you down if I saw you--"

James holds up a finger, and Clint stops mid-sentence. "Piotr, stand against the far wall and put this apple on your head," James says.

"Go fuck yourself," says Piotr, making a face.

"Nice unit discipline," snarks Tony.

"Fuck you, asshole, I'd follow this idiot to hell if he asked," Piotr snarls.

"Hell, aka Somalia," sighs Kolya.

"<Ugh,>" says Natasha. "<Don't remind me.>"

Dima bounces to his feet and whistles, holding out his hand for the apple. James grins and tosses it to him, and Dima waddles over to the wall and plops the apple on the top of his head with a grin.

James walks a short distance away from Dima, also near the wall, and glances over to Clint. "I was maybe this far?"

"Yeah," says Clint, backing up to the far side of the room. "And running."

"Okay. Say *go*, then aim to kill with me, but aim for the apple with Dima," says James.

"Uh..." says Clint, glancing at Steve.

James sighs. "Trust me."

Tony makes a hand motion and the music in the room cuts off, the only remaining sound being the tinny noise of the *Zootopia* clip Sam is playing on his phone. Sam and Darcy blush, and pause the video.

“Jarvis,” Tony whispers. “Record this.”

“Wait,” Natasha says. The microwave beeps and she opens it and pulls out a bag of popcorn. She hops up to sit on the bar and tears the bag open. “Now we're ready.”

“Okay,” says Clint, nocking an arrow and drawing his heavy, compound bow. “GO.”

James lopez forwards in the hunched run of a soldier under fire, and Clint shoots two arrows in close succession, one at James' head, one slightly above Dima's.

What happens next is almost too fast for the naked eye to parse: James suddenly moves a lot faster than a normal human could, grabbing the arrow meant for him inches from his head and twisting to grab the one headed for Dima in the same hand. He keeps turning and flicks his free hand out towards Clint, a throwing knife slicing through the air and clattering into the bow's top limb as Clint moves it away from himself.

“Okay, well, *fuck*,” Clint says, picking up the knife and looking over to where James is grinning at him.

James grabs the apple off Dima's head and bites into it.

His brothers whistle and cheer. “*That's* why we would follow him to hell,” says Piotr.

“What larks is this?” a voice booms from the doorway. “I was not told there would be feats of arms at this banquet!” Thor strides in with a huge smile, Jane trailing behind him. “Finally some Midgardians who know how to party!”

Steve gets up and hugs Thor. “You made it!”

Thor places his hands on Steve's shoulders and looks down at him, taking in Steve's aura, the relaxed expression in his face, the lack of tension in his body. “Steven, you are much changed since I was last on Midgard.”

Steve smiles and glances over at James, who is happily listening as Clint slings an arm around him and makes plans for a weekend of “go'in' down to the range and shootin' shit, then we bogart the big TV and watch *Deathsport*, or hey, you ever seen *Cannonball*?”

“Yeah,” says Steve. “I have changed.”

Thor pats him on the back, hard enough to almost knock Steve over. Then Thor leans in close. “He has the mien of a great warrior,” says Thor. “And his aura is suffused with love for you. You have chosen well.”

“Neither of us will be warriors any more,” says Steve. “I left. I stepped down.”

Thor smiles warmly. “There are many ways to fight. The easiest way is with weapons, to take life, but the most honourable way is to preserve life. Asgard has as long a tradition of healers as it does warriors. But I am glad to see you happy, friend Steven. Perhaps for the first time.”

Meanwhile, Jane is staring past them at Darcy on the sofa, her expression quizzical. “I know you. You're... you're the intern that bailed out on me. The Politics major,” Jane says. “Darcy, right?”

“Ohmigod! Doctor Foster!” Darcy says, springing to her feet. “I am so, so sorry about that.” She waves her arms around. “I dropped out to follow my boyfriend to New York but he turned out to be a shitbag and then I was homeless and then I ended up working at a bike shop owned by a hot

Russian super-soldier who's now banging Captain America only he's not Captain America any more and nobody knew James was a super-soldier until, like, *last week*--" Darcy hyperventilates for a moment, then gets her breathing under control. "--and so yeah. Shit's been cray. Um, how are you?"

"Oh, you know," Jane says, sitting down next to Darcy. "Started dating a Norse God, travelled to other dimensions, met lots of aliens."

\* \* \*

James stands outside the little Bay Ridge brownstone and digs in his heels. "Steve," he whispers, "I-- I can't do it."

Steve runs a hand up James' arm. "Look, she's 93. if you don't do it now you may not get another chance," he says, soothingly.

James shakes his head, hiding behind a curtain of hair, and folds in on himself. "I'm not... I'm not him. I'm not even what he would have been if he grew up. They fucked with our genetics, a lot. I may not even *look* like he did. We shouldn't have gotten her hopes up. I'm just going to be a disappointment," he mutters.

Steve notices a bit of lace curtain twitching at the house's first-floor window, and he bumps James' shoulder. "She's seen you now. You have to go in. Besides, she probably has some horribly embarrassing stories about me growing up that she can tell you."

James looks up and indeed, there's a tiny, white-haired old woman looking out the window, waving at them eagerly. Though her eyes are old and watery, and surrounded by wrinkles, they are as blue as James'. James freezes as Steve waves back.

Then Steve elbows, James. "Come on."

James takes a deep breath and walks up the stoop to the front door, as if going to his own execution.

A middle-aged woman with a greying ponytail, a Blondie t-shirt and a corduroy A-line skirt opens the door, introducing herself as Rebecca's granddaughter, Sarah-with-an-H. Steve makes a small noise behind James, and James is suddenly conscious that he's not the only one this visit might affect.

They're led into the comfortable front room of the little brownstone, all done up in cheerful, clashing floral prints, blowzy roses climbing over sofa fabric and tiny sprigged violets on the wallpaper. There's a little too much furniture, and on every surface spreads a collection of plump porcelain cats – from cheerful Japanese maneki neko to fat and slightly deranged-looking Staffordshire pottery pussies.

Rebecca Barnes is also in a floral dress, loose and comfortable with big patch pockets in the front, and she shuffles over to James immediately, leaning heavily on a splay-footed cane as she does so.

James has made an effort to look decent, borrowing one of Steve's blue button-down shirts and a good pair of dark-brown trousers. His hair is pulled back neatly and his face is newly shaved. It all combines to make him feel like an impostor.

The little old lady looks up at him with wonder. “So you're him,” she says, soft and reedy, and shakes her head slightly.

James takes her expression as denial, as refusal, and he's about to step out of the way, to run, when she reaches out to touch him. Her trembling hand knocks into one of the porcelain cats on the side table next to her – a turquoise Siamese – and sends it hurtling towards the hardwood floor.

James doesn't even think about it; he's reacting before thought, and he catches the tumbling pottery cat before it can shatter. He holds it out to her, and then thinks better of it, and puts it back on the table, further away from the edge than it had been.

“My cleaning gal never puts them back in the right place,” Rebecca sighs. “Personally I think she's getting revenge on me for having to dust so many things.”

“I, I'm not him,” James repeats, for Rebecca this time.

Rebecca fumbles in the pockets of her dress and pulls out an old, old photograph, of a little boy about eight or nine years old, with his arm slung around a girl about half his age. The girl is holding a kitten. The boy... the boy is skinny and fierce, with a mop of dark hair and a defiant expression on his face. His trouser leg is torn at the knee, and there's a scratch on his cheekbone. His eyes are pale and blurred, the act of keeping still for a photograph with the early, long-exposure cameras obviously too much for him.

Steve takes the photograph, gazing at it.

“Some kids found abandoned kittens and were throwing bricks at them,” Rebecca said. “We were supposed to have our photo taken. Mom had saved up for it for weeks, and we passed the alley and I saw what was happening and started crying. There was only one kitten still alive and Bucky, he pulled out of Mom's grasp and ran in there and jumped on the biggest kid's back and bit him in the ear. Those kids were about 12, too.”

She smiled. “Bucky never fought fair. The kid screamed and called Bucky crazy, and Mom's yelling at *everyone*, swearing a blue streak in Irish, and then as the ringleader was backing away, Bucky grabbed a brick and flung it at him, and it missed him and hit the kid next to him right in the balls. They ran off to get their parents and Bucky snatched the remaining kitten and shoved her at me, and Mom hauled us to the photographer's studio. She was *so* mad, she dragged him by the hair. Bucky had ruined his church suit, and I screamed bloody murder every time someone tried to take the kitten out of my arms.”

“That was the little calico cat,” Steve said. “Wasn't it? I remember her. You used to walk her on a piece of ribbon.” He passes the photo over to James, who takes it in shaking hands.

“Yes,” Rebecca says. “Patches was her name. Great cat. Never had a mouse or a rat in our apartment once she moved in.”

James sits down on the chintz sofa, staring at the little, faded photo with its brown image and scalloped edges. He can't speak.

It *is* him.

That's him, in the photo, but it can't be, because when he was eight or nine he lived in a military lab in Arkhangelsk, and it was 1995, not 1925. He puts a hand over his mouth, and he can feel his eyes welling up with tears.

He places the photo next to the turquoise cat and buries his face in his hands. “I'm sorry. I don't

know what to do,” he says, his voice broken with emotion. “I’m sorry they... *stole* him.”

Steve sits down next to him and rubs his back, giving wordless support.

Rebecca reaches forwards and grabs James’ hand, pulling it away from his face. “I know you’re not him. I’m old, honey, but I’m not senile. And I’m not sorry at all that a bunch of crazy scientists thought my big brother was amazing enough to recreate, and I sure bet Stevie Rogers over there isn’t sorry about it either.”

“Life’s a magnificent, crazy thing, isn’t it?” says Sarah, coming back in with a pitcher of iced tea and glasses.

“Besides, you’re definitely not Bucky because you’re way too tidy for him,” Rebecca says, refusing a glass. “Bucky couldn’t walk around the block without tearing a hole in his clothes. He managed to tear his shirt in church. *In. Church.* During communion.”

Steve guffaws into a throw pillow and James quietly punches Steve in the leg, hard.

Rebecca narrows her eyes and looks conspiratorial. “Now, you wanna hear all the old neighborhood gossip about this one, or what?” she asks, tilting her white curls towards Steve.

James darts a glance over at Steve, catches his mock-horrified expression, and smirks at Rebecca. “Definitely. Tell me everything.”

But Rebecca goes pale, and staring at him.

“I’m sorry-- what have I--” James says, confusion and terror clutching at his insides.

Rebecca’s eyes are wet with tears, and she points a trembling , gnarled finger at him. “It’s *his* smile, that’s Bucky’s smile. I never thought I’d see it again.” She smiles and sobs at the same time. “I feel like a little girl again.”

Sarah hurries off to get her grandmother a tissue, and once Rebecca has wiped her face she gets up and makes her way over to James with her slow, painful shuffle.

She eases herself down next to James on the sofa and takes his hands, warm and strong, in her papery, old ones. “James. I’m gonna pull the old-lady card on you. I’m not going to be on this earth for much longer, so I’ve learned to be pretty direct about what I want. *Please* be part of our family. They said you don’t have anyone,” and Rebecca looks over at Steve, reaching for his hand too, “and that you’re all alone in the world too, now. We want you to be part of us. We’re loud, we drink too much, half of us are recovering Catholics--”

--Uncle Ralph’s a fucking racist--” Sarah grumbles.

--*Language*, Sarah,” Rebecca admonishes, then continues to James and Steve, “but this old house holds about 24 people for Thanksgiving and Christmas and as it stands there are only 18 of us. Please. Make an old lady happy. I want to see that smile as often as I can in the time I have left, and then when I get to Heaven I’m gonna tell Bucky all about you. He’ll love it. He was crazy for science fiction stories.”

James knows of no words in any language that can express how he feels, so he just nods, squeezes Rebecca’s hand, and smiles again.

“Uncle Ralph really is a fucking racist, though,” Rebecca whispers. “Last Thanksgiving, I spat in his sweet potatoes.”

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, Steve and James cruise up a long gravel driveway, flanked by banks of bright rhododendrons, to a small but elegant colonnaded brick house in the Virginia countryside. Roses and shaped boxwood bushes flourish in formal beds in front of the house; gardenias in decorative pots perfume the air on either side of the door.

James parks the bike and Steve steps off, taking off his helmet and unconsciously straightening his shirt and brushing through his hair. He's fretting, and James can see that. James reaches out a languid arm and hooks his fingers into Steve's belt, dragging him close. He stands up and kisses Steve, muttering "for luck" against his lips.

Claire, the maid, smiles as she opens the door to greet them. "It's a good day," she says. "Come on, she's waiting for you in the conservatory."

"It's okay, I know the way," says Steve. He leads Bucky through the elegant house, down the teal-blue hallway decorated in framed photos of a life spent serving two nations.

Then, at the end, just as the hall opens up into bright sunlight, a glassed-in room furnished in yellow and sage green, Steve puts a hand on James' chest to halt him. "Give me a moment first?" he asks.

James nods, and retreats into the shadows of the hallway to look at the photographs.

Peggy Carter and the Howling Commandos. Peggy and Steve. Peggy and FDR. Peggy and Churchill. Peggy in Hollywood. Peggy with a pretty redheaded woman, their arms around each other. Peggy and Gabe Jones. Peggy and Nick Fury. Peggy in a jungle; Peggy in a desert. Peggy with the Dalai Lama. Peggy at the White House. Peggy and Gromyko, stalking through the corridors of the UN, arguing.

Meanwhile, the lady herself reaches up to accept Steve's kiss on the cheek from her favourite chaise-longue, the one with a view of the house's immaculate back lawn and gardens that also gives her a good view, via a strategically-placed mirror, of the hallway leading to the conservatory.

"Whatcha reading, Peg?" Steve asks, indicating the paperback on the little white wicker table next to her.

"Oh, some ridiculous thing of Claire's. I've gotten sentimental in my dotage, Steve. Apparently I have a soft spot for romance," she says, managing to look simultaneously aghast and pleased with herself.

"Keeping busy?" he asks, still holding her hand.

"Yes. The gardens, Steve. What a mess," she says, gazing out in annoyance at what to Steve looks like the sort of garden featured in glossy magazines as a symbol of unattainable perfection. "The Japanese beetles this year are a *terror*, and my grape arbour just isn't coming along the way I want it to. Oh, and of course between that Pierce dolt at State and the situation in Syria, my phone's been off the hook."

"So yes," Peggy says. Her tone is arch, light but deadly, as she continues: "I've been busy. Though *not* as busy as you."

"I'm sorry I've taken so long to visit," Steve says, wilting. "I've missed you so much. Really could have used your advice so many times over the past couple months."

"You seem to have done all right, from the little I heard," says Peggy, and Steve knows from experience that by *the little I heard*, Peggy means *everything about this situation, the one that you did not tell me about, but I went and found out by myself anyway*.

Steve wipes a hand down his face.

"Bring him in, Steve. I'm dying to meet him," Peggy smiles.

"Why do I even bother," Steve groans.

"At this point I truly do not know," Peggy hums.

Then her face changes, as she looks past Steve. "Oh," she says. "*Oh*."

James leans in the entrance to the conservatory, thumbs looped into his jeans pocket, leather racing jacket slung over one forearm. "Agent Carter," he says, nodding.

Peggy gives Steve a frankly lascivious look. "*Steve*. I approve." Then she beckons to James. "Come over here, Mister Barnes. Actually, which name do I use for you? You have so many. I'd prefer not to use Seven though, calling a person by a number is simply barbaric."

James blushes as he walks towards her. "James is fine."

Peggy shifts her legs over and pats the chaise longue, and James sits down on its edge.

"Now," she says. "You have to understand that I have a network of faithful spies in nearly every corner of the world, and that if you ever do anything to harm him or break his heart I will do everything in my power to make sure you don't live to see the next sunrise."

"Peggy..." Steve sighs.

"Don't you 'Peggy' me, Rogers," she says. "You are the best of us, you always have been, and you always will be. And judging by the way James looks at you I'm quite sure he knows that too, but I hold to the first three words the Service taught me." She smiles. "Trust, but verify."

"She's just joking about the killing you part," Steve says to James.

"I'm bloody well not, darling," Peggy says to him, patting his hand. "And I am perfectly aware of how hard you are to kill, Winter. Also, if you plan to make an honest man out of him, I would humbly suggest that this house would make an ideal wedding venue."

"Ah," James says, suddenly melancholy. He spreads his hands as he continues. "Alas I cannot make an honest man out of him. He has an unfulfilled responsibility to another."

Steve glances at James in confusion, and Peggy raises an eyebrow.

James tilts his head and meets Peggy's gaze. "He owes you a dance." Then he smiles at her. "You're not the only one who did their research."

Peggy makes a quiet noise of appreciation then turns to Steve. "You're keeping him," says Peggy, in a voice that brooks no argument, as a smile spreads across her face.

James rises from the chaise longue and tucks his phone into a small, portable speaker that he pulls



out of the pocket of his jacket, setting the whole thing up on the wicker table near Peggy's book. "The lady picks the song?" he asks.

"We're really doing this?" says Steve.

"Yes," says James.

"We are indeed. Hm. Oh, I can't do anything fast any more, sadly." Peggy drums her perfectly manicured fingers against her chin. "Do you have any Chet Baker?"

"I have the internet," James says. "There is everything."

"Then I choose [My Funny Valentine](#)," she says. "It reminds me of Steve before... before he got hidden away in that giant body." She grins, reaching out to poke playfully at Steve's left pectoral. "Not that I *mind* The Body, but for a long time after you woke up from the ice I thought the weight of it was going to stifle the passionate, determined man I first fell in love with."

"It near as dammit did, Pegs," Steve says, standing up and extending his hand to his best girl as the first notes of Baker's vocals fill the room.

"Yes," she says, stepping her bare feet with their red toenails on top of Steve's huge feet. "As they say, a close-run thing."

Steve puts his arms around Peggy's waist and looks down into her warm brown eyes. She's still amazing. She never stopped, not for one moment of her life, Steve thinks, and he presses his lips against hers. "I still can't dance," he says.

"I still don't care," Peggy replies. Her arms circle his neck and she weighs less than a bird as he shuffles her in a simple box step that manages to fall somewhere near the beat.

They slow-dance all the way through *My Funny Valentine* and into the next songs, [There Will Never Be Another You](#) and *My Ideal*, there in the late-morning Virginia sunshine, the filtered light of an oak tree coating them in dappled light, the flowers of the brash geraniums scattered around the conservatory in bright complement to Peggy's red lips and nails.

Peggy coughs as *My Ideal* ends, looking woozy, and James stops the music to call for Claire and ask for some water. He strides down the hallway in search of her, leaving Steve and Peggy alone. Steve lowers Peggy back down onto her chaise longue and presses his lips to her hand.

Peggy smiles at him, her eyes wet with emotion. "It was worth the wait," she says. "Now go be happy with your man. And send me postcards."

\* \* \*

Steve is finishing up sketching his weekly postcard to Peggy when he hears the Quinjet land. He steps out of his tent and squints across the field in the hot Mediterranean sunshine, then waves in delight as Clint and Bruce pile out of the little jet.

Clint's wearing a John Deere hat and an old purple t-shirt, baggy jeans, and flip-flops. He strides over and wraps Steve in a bear hug. "How ya been?" he says.

“Good,” says Steve. “Missing James. He's been gone all week dealing with race stuff.”

“Think there will be more protests?” Bruce asks.

Steve shrugs. “I hope not. Pepper's helping with PR counterattacks, and James' old unit are handling security, so I'm not too worried. None of us thought people would get so *upset* about a race, though.”

“Well,” Bruce sighs. “Even people who say they are okay with mutants and inhumans, what they often mean is they are okay with them as long as they stay out of the way and conform. Heaven forfend posthumans be out and competing in sports and doing something that turns out to be *popular*.” He kicks a small stone. “James and Tony are doing something important. They shouldn't stop,” he says.

“The second race was seen by what, 80 million people around the world?” Clint says, his arm around Steve's shoulders. “Haters gonna hate, but ratings don't lie. Your boyfriend getting in a fight with that lizard guy at 200 miles per hour didn't hurt, gotta be said.”

“It still makes me mad,” Steve says, leading them towards the main work site on the island. “You know they want to take his speed records away from him? Official speed record is still 376. His 402 is unofficial, because he's posthuman.”

“Is James upset?” Bruce asks.

Steve shakes his head, smiling to himself. “James doesn't care. I think that makes the various governing racing bodies even angrier, that he's not asking for their approval.” He pauses at the edge of the disaster area.

“Whoa. So this is what happens when a Skrull spaceship crashes into a mountain,” Clint says.

“And then the mountain falls on a town,” Steve finishes.

“What do you need me to do while you're gone?” Bruce asks.

“We're starting the rebuild stage,” Steve says, pointing to squares marked out in rubble with posts and tape. “James and I spent the first four days digging people out, then it was all straight medical and disaster-relief stuff. Triage, extraction for the badly wounded, stabilising the area, and building our tent village so people had a place to stay. Now it's giving them their homes back. Water's an issue. We need a school. Some sort of normalcy for the kids, and then we'll also get more parents able to help with construction. The UN team is doing really well with the rebuild work, but I'd feel better if you could just... work on the school part. Try to keep the kids' spirits up. These people lost everything, for no damn reason at all.”

“I can do that,” says Bruce.

“Thank you,” says Steve. “You can stay in our tent. Ask for Agnetha, she's the local UN co-ordinator and she knows everyone.”

“We gonna go watch a race now?” Clint grins.

“Yeah,” says Steve. He looks down at the blue t-shirt and beige cargo shorts he's wearing, decides it's good enough. He grabs a backpack in his tent, stuffing it with a change of civilian clothes and his new uniform.

During the actual rescue phase of any operation, he and James wear uniforms. Steve's is a simple

navy blue with a white star on the chest; James' is charcoal-black with a red star on his left shoulder the same size as Steve's. Steve had been against the idea of a uniform at first, but Pepper won him over. She had explained the importance of strangers being able to recognise them quickly in the field. She'd also wondered aloud if he'd feel better knowing James was wearing something bulletproof, and vice versa. Steve had agreed. The way the uniform designs emphasised Steve and James as equals, a Russian / American team, had been an unexpected benefit, too, easing their involvement in cultures suspicious of American imperialism. Captain America, it turned out, cast a long shadow.

The uniforms fit like a second skin. Steve would never forget the first time James had tried on his, looking up at him through a curtain of hair and asking shyly, "it's okay?" As if James in tight black Kevlar could ever be anything less than traffic-stoppingly sexy. Steve had shifted uncomfortably, told James that yes, it was okay, and then dragged him into a broom closet for a crash course in just how fast they could peel that uniform off. James had, to Steve's mixed disappointment and relief, started wearing black tactical trousers over his uniform in the field, because pockets were useful things. Of course he'd ripped the trousers almost immediately, and Steve had taken to mending them for him with patches in the form of little flags of all the countries they'd worked in.

A few things hadn't changed. Steve knew that the hard case James travelled with contained his sniper rifle, handguns, and about a half-dozen knives, at least a couple of which were on his body even during rescue ops. He'd chosen not to say anything about James' weapons, though, especially after an early mission in Norway (of all places) had turned ugly. Some super-powered neo-nazi and his robot buddy had decided that killing the former Captain America during a tsunami relief operation would make their reputations.

Only, they hadn't accounted for James.

When James was done with the neo-Nazi, there was barely enough of the guy left to fit in a shoebox.

The work they did now was tough, and heartbreaking, and Steve was angry nearly all the time at the sheer stupidity of the world, but underneath it all he was happy. There were moments that made it all worthwhile, like finding a mother and child still alive in the basement of a collapsed building. A child who wouldn't have lasted, if the UN relief team had to wait for cranes and heavy equipment to be brought in over blocked roads or loaded onto barges, rather than being able to throw a couple super-soldiers at the problem.

Somehow it felt right to be living in tents again, always on the move, getting back to New York once a month if they were lucky. They were together, always together, collapsing onto the same mattress at night all dirty and sore and reeking of smoke, waking the next morning in each others' arms and doing it all again.

Steve felt he'd gone from being an empty symbol, an object with no friends except his teammates, to someone with friends all around the world, people he'd shared bread and stories with around campfires from Japan to Argentina, people whose babies he'd delivered, whose elders he'd carried over miles of rough ground to field hospitals. He also had a family now, they both did, a couple dozen raucous Brooklyn Irish Barneses (intermarried with a fair amount of Brooklyn Caribbean and Italian), who they'd Skype once a week and fill in on their latest adventures.

They'd Skype with Darcy, too, who had turned Red Star's ground floor into a bakery, complete with Pingu as Bakery Dog, and with James' brothers, who were working security on the race circuit. He had so many people now that he loved and trusted.

Above all else, though, he had James. James who loved him and could light his body on fire with a

touch, and pull him out of his own head with a sly joke. James who chose to be something other than a weapon, and who made Steve believe he had choices too. James who he loved.

And to think it had all come about because he was too stubborn to let Tony fix his bike.

Steve shook his head and smiled to himself. Sarah Barnes was right. Life *was* a magnificent thing.

He slung his backpack over his shoulder and hustled to the Quinjet. They had a race to watch.

## Chapter End Notes

It's done. \*collapses\*

[Chapter title song](#). Ugh, this song gets me every time. Even if you don't usually listen to the chapter title songs, go listen to this one. It's probably my favourite love song.

I actually wrote another thousand or so words about the race (in Sarajevo) but it wasn't really going anywhere, and the end point made itself clear that it should be a little earlier.

Wow.

This fic sorta took over my life. I'm so glad that so many of you have enjoyed it -- I'm amazed, in fact. Thank you. Every last one of you. It's been difficult to keep up the pace with the story. Weekly updates for a fic with 6,000+ word chapters, even when you have a good, detailed outline, is... a lot.

I'm taking a little break from fics for a while. I plan to update (I'm Friends With The) Monster monthly from now on. And of course my unhelpful brain is like "here is an idea for a really fun Shrinkylinks A/B/O fic because man, A/B/O has some interesting concepts but a lot of cringey writing, bet you could do something cool, c'mon, try it, you know you want to". THANKS, BRAIN.

The main reason I'm taking a break from fic is to write The Goddamn Novel, which hopefully I can get paid for. [And which will be serialised here on Wattpad](#). I'm actually quite excited about The Goddamn Novel, as the giant tangled outline is starting to make sense and to form into an actual, y'know, plot, instead of a big pot of angst and feelings and vaguery. (Frankly I don't give a shit if I ever get paid for The Goddamn Novel, it's very much a heart story and I need to get it out of me and onto the page.)

Randomly: all opinions about Russian heavy metal in this chapter belong to the characters. Aria fans, take it up with Kolya, not me. (I'm totally down for your Russian rock / metal recs, tho. Or music recs in general. Let's do this! Remember we also have [an awesome Lucky Seven playlist by Rohkeutta, here](#)). Plague Bride does not exist, but c'mon, we all know Sokovia would enter a death metal band in Eurovision, don't we? (I think about the MCU's Eurovision entries almost as much as I think about Hydra's medical insurance benefits, which is to say far, far more than any human should.)

Also randomly: I don't ship Sharon/Steve at all, and I \*think\* I don't like Sharon, but every time I write her, she turns out awesome. (Not as awesome as Peggy, though. Or Rebecca Barnes.)

Clint Barton drinks Rolling Rock or Coors. He has no time for your fancy IPAs.

"Life is a magnificent thing" is a line from the book Macho Camacho's Beat, which is fabulous and you should all read.

OH GOD I'M GOING TO MISS ALL OF YOU. \*snif\* sorry feeling very tired and quite emotional. Huge thanks of course to The Stucky Library for organising the Big Bang, and my amazing artists Rohkeutta, JustGot1, and Dadbob / Electran.

[Please check out all the other awesome fics in the SBB 2016 collection!](#)

[This fic right here](#) is my fave SBB fic so far. Go read it. Trust me.

Here are also two non BB2016 fics I read recently and loved: [Honeypot](#) and [These American Dreams](#). Both are quite steamy (TAD more slow burn, Honeypot gets to it pretty fast) and give A+ badass Bucky.

Bike porn, farewell edition: The Aprilia RSV4 RR. For the non-superbike fans, [here's British Customs' website](#). Try not to drool on your keyboard.



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